

Pastor Jamie's Sermon

Good Shepherd Church, October 20, 2024

"Heroic Ambition"

Young at Heart Message

Imagine, for a moment, that you are talking to your spouse.

You somewhat casually mention that in a few weeks, you're both going to visit your mother a few towns over for the day.

Your spouse dismissively says "sure, sure, sounds good honey!"

A week later, you say "we'll need to leave early the day we go to visit my mother, so let's make sure we pack the night before."

Your spouse says, "wait, what?! We're going to visit your mother?? You never told me that!"

An argument follows in which you say "yes, I told you!"

Your spouse says "no you didn't," and eventually one of you figures you made a mistake, and you move on.

The night before the trip to your mother's house comes, and you remind your spouse that you need to pack what you need tonight because you have to leave early tomorrow.

And again, your spouse acts as though this is the first time they've heard that you're going to your mother's.

In an exasperated way, you throw up your hands and say "well, I guess there's just no use telling you anything, you don't listen anyway!"

Does this sound familiar to those of you who have been married?

Sometimes, maybe it really is that your spouse wasn't truly paying attention, didn't hear you properly, forgot, or some other very reasonable explanation.

But other times, I think it's that we don't really want to hear what our partner is saying because we don't really want to admit that we don't want to participate.

In these scenarios, sometimes we also will deflect, bringing up a totally different subject to take the pressure off.

Or, we might say something that sounds a bit childish. Something like “fine, if I have to go to your mother’s, then I’m not driving. You’ll have to drive, and I’ll nap. I’m not navigating either – you’re on your own!”

Or perhaps we’d try to barter with our partner.

We might say “fine, I’ll go to your mother’s, but then you have to go golfing with me next week!”

At the very least, if we have to do something we don’t really want to do, maybe we can get something better out of the situation.

Of course, the reality is that it does us no good to avoid listening to our partner because it just leads to more stress and frustration in the long run.

But, in the moment, it’s something we can push out of our minds until we’re forced to think about it.

It is often easier in the moment to avoid thinking too hard about things we don’t want to do, or things we would prefer weren’t going to happen at all.

If we avoid it, perhaps it won’t happen.

But if it does happen, at least maybe we can get something out of it for ourselves!

While this might sound silly, this is the situation in which we encounter the disciples in this week’s scripture passage.

The Message

If I followed the lectionary suggested texts perfectly, today’s scripture reading would not have included the section in which Jesus takes the disciples aside and tells them what is going to happen to him.

Luckily, you have a renegade pastor who doesn’t always follow the rules!

I included that section because I think it’s important.

Much like our little scenario earlier, this is the *third* time Jesus has foreshadowed for his disciples his own death and resurrection.

The *third* time.

And what do his disciples do?

James and John ask if *they* can sit at his right side and his left side.

It's almost as though they didn't hear what Jesus was saying at all.

Or, perhaps, they didn't *want* to hear what Jesus was saying.

It was easier to think about what would happen to *them* than to think about the prediction of Jesus's death in that moment.

I suppose they figured that if they could get their commitment before Jesus died, they would at least be certain of their future despite the difficult news they just heard.

Really, what they were trying to do, it seems, was take the easy way out.

Rather than do the hard work that Jesus has been telling them over and over again that they would need to do once he died, they wanted to take the easy way out.

The definition of a magnanimous person is, according to the Miriam-Webster Dictionary, "showing or suggesting a courageous spirit or generosity of mind."

And the definition of pusillanimous is "lacking courage and resolution."

Magnanimous people set their sights high and, in everything they do, they aspire to do what is best, even if it means sacrificing themselves to do so.

Not fearing the cost of heroic ambitions, magnanimous people strive for excellence and hunger for greatness, but they do so with generosity of mind and a courageous spirit.

By contrast, pusillanimous people regularly opt for whatever is easier or more quickly attainable.

Thus, they deny themselves the joy and meaning and satisfaction that comes from surrounding themselves in love and care for others.

It may seem, by these definitions, that James and John are pusillanimous people – looking for the easy way out.

Jesus knows, however, that they are merely expressing what all of the disciples are thinking: we have done the hard work of following Jesus, and we deserve our just reward when his journey ends.

Jesus turns this somewhat misguided desire for greatness on its head, though, when he tells them the true path of heroic ambition does not lead to a seat on either side of him.

Rather, it goes in a shockingly different direction.

Human nature, of course, is such that we desire greatness in the traditional sense: power, privilege, prestige, or wealth.

Jesus challenges his disciples, and us, to imagine greatness differently.

He says, “Whoever wishes to be great among you” must set out in what seems the opposite direction of greatness.

In the Christian life, greatness is measured in serving; in expending ourselves in love, sacrifice and generosity to others.

Moreover, honour is found not in titles or privilege or celebrity or wealth, but in goodness and humility.

In the strange world of the reign of God, power is not a matter of ruling over others but of living on their behalf.

Jesus reminds us, once again, that the road to glory is *only* by way of the cross.

Even Jesus does not receive glory except through suffering and death on a cross.

Jesus is encouraging his disciples to be magnanimous – to have courageous spirits and generous minds.

He doesn't want them to avoid the challenges ahead.

Jesus has no intention of avoiding the difficult path that is laid before him, and he doesn't want the disciples, or us, to avoid the challenges either.

Jesus wants us to approach life with courage and generosity.

He knows it would be far easier to run – he could avoid his own suffering by hiding away, leaving the area, and being a fugitive for the rest of his life.

While that might not mean an easy life, it would certainly be easier than facing the prospect of his death head on.

And yet, he is challenging his disciples to walk that difficult journey with him courageously, and to remain dedicated to sharing his wisdom and words after he is gone.

Jesus says he doesn't know who will be on his right or left sides.

But that isn't the point anyway.

Jesus doesn't want his disciples to avoid the hard truth that he is heading into Jerusalem to be put to death.

He wants them to acknowledge it, to learn to move forward, and to continue their journey of love and care for each other and the world.

It's an important but difficult lesson that Jesus repeats over and over again.

And when Jesus repeats these kinds of lessons, it is worth remembering for our own lives.

So, may we heed Jesus's words and remember that in order to be truly great, we must be "the servant of all the others. And if you want to be first, you must be everyone's slave."

May we remember that as a Christian community, we are the servants to humanity and to all of God's creation.

May we choose magnanimity – courageous spirits and generosity of mind – and may we be servants of God and of our fellow humans in as many ways as we can be.

Amen.

Let us pray:

God of grace, Christ comes among us not with power and dominion but in vulnerability and humble service. We do not look up to see Christ; we look down, and find our salvation there, kneeling at our feet, serving us in love. We thank you for your grace, and pray that you may fill us with your humble love, in the power of your spirit, in the presence of Jesus Christ. Amen.