

“Not So With You”

One of the defining characteristics of Jesus' life and ministry was his ability to take what everyone (in the world) understood to be “the norm” and turn it upside down. Whenever there was a (certain way) people did things (in the world) and an (established way) everyone expected things to be done, that did not fit with the way things were intended (by God) to be, Jesus would take those expectations (and patterns) and turn them around.

For example, in his sermon on the mount, one of the greatest teaching sermons he ever preached, he said things like “You've heard that it was said...an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.” (This is how the world does it.) If someone strikes you, you strike them back. If someone says something unkind to you, you shouldn't feel any obligation to be kind to them. (That's what happens in the world.)

“But I say to you” (Jesus said), (this is what God wants; this is how things were intended to be), ‘Do not resist the person who is evil. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. If someone wants to take your jacket, let him have your shirt as well.’”

Jesus (in his ministry) was a master at taking what was commonly recognized as being the norm, the way things are in the world, and turning them into the way things are meant (and intended to be) in the kingdom. And in so doing, he challenged his followers (back then) and he continues to challenge his followers today.

And so we come to week seven in our “Next Steps” series. We've been taking on different topics (in these weeks), characteristics, elements of Jesus' ministry and life, and asking the question, “What does this mean for me? What are the next steps I need to take, in this certain (area of my life), in my faith-walk with Christ?”

The passage we read today is a great of example of how Jesus was able to take what was understood to be the norm and turn it upside down, and, in so doing, help us to see and understand what God wants to see (and to find) in us. Mark chapter ten is where we're at today.

Let me give you a bit of context into today's story. Today's story involves all twelve of the disciples, but two of the disciples in particular: James and John. James and John were both fisherman, before they were called by Jesus. They were brothers, sons of a man named Zebedee.

They were also two of the three disciples that were considered to be Jesus' closest disciples: James and John, and Peter. On several occasions, Jesus took with him only those three, while the other nine stayed behind.

The raising of Jairus' daughter in Mark (chapter 5), Jesus' transfiguration (in chapter 9), and the time he spent in Gethsemane, (in chapter 14), right before his death on the cross, are (just a few examples) of times Jesus spent with only those “inner three.”

So, what's happening in our text today, and how does this context make a difference in what we find? What's happening is that Jesus has (once again) told his disciples (all twelve of them) about what was soon to happen. In verse 32, (Mark says) “They were on their way up to Jerusalem, with Jesus leading the way,” and (on the way) (it says), Jesus told them of how he was going to suffer and die, and how three days later he would come back to life.

Now, there a couple of things worth mentioning before we go too far. One is that when we read these verses, (after the fact) we know what they're all about. Jesus is predicting what was going to happen on Good Friday (on the day he died), and he was telling them what would happen (three days later) on Easter, (when he would rise). We know that, looking back. They did not know that, looking ahead.

The other is that in Mark's gospel, discipleship (being one of his followers) is consistently defined as “following Jesus on the way;” (“following Jesus on the way.”) And not “on the way” we would choose to follow him, but on the way he would choose for us. In other words, being a disciple (of Jesus) is a life of continually working to imitate (in our lives) the pattern he set in his.

And so what do the disciples do in the story? After hearing what's going to happen to Jesus and being challenged with following him “on the way,” what do they do? Mark say, “Then (immediately), James and John, the sons of Zebedee, (two of these “inner three”) they come to Jesus (and say), ‘Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask.’” (“We want you to do for us whatever we ask.”)

Now, let's stop for a moment and take a step back. (What's happening?) What's going in this conversation with Jesus and these two disciples? This is one of those moments every parent (at some point in their parenting) has experienced with their children.

(You've seen it.) You have this time at the dinner table (with your kids) when you're sharing something that's important. You've just spelled it out. You've just told them something you hope they'll not miss, and (it seems like) they're listening. You're convinced that what you've just shared, they've caught. (There's no doubt.)

Until that moment when they say, "Dad, are you done now? Can we go out and play?" or, "Mom, do you know how every time you talk to us like this, how your mouth does this funny thing on the side?" (They don't get it.) They have no clue. That's what was happening with the disciples.

Jesus had just told them about the cross, about what was soon to happen to him in Jerusalem, ("on the way") and what do they do? They make this silly statement about wanting Jesus to do for them whatever they ask. It was obvious. (They didn't get it.) They weren't even close.

And so what happens? In the story, Jesus plays along. He asks, "What do you want me to do for you?" They reply, "Let one of us sit at your right hand and the other at your left in your glory." (In other words), "When you make it to the top, Jesus, we'd like to be there right next to you. When you're sitting on your throne (as king), how about letting us sit one on either side?"

Now, talk about things that are understood to be the norm. Everyone who has ever been through Middle School and High School knows there's a certain way things work in the world. There's an "in" group (in school), as well as a definite "out" group. There's a group that sits on the top and there's another group (or groups) that fall somewhere beneath.

It's the same thing in the working world. Someone is always the boss. Someone is always tasked with being in charge. And when you're in charge, the way things work (in the world), is that those who work, work for you. You call the shots. You make the decisions. And what they do in their work is being done for you. That's how it works. That's what it means to be on the top.

James and John, they knew all of that. (This was nothing different.) They weren't trying to fight it. They knew Jesus would be the one on the top. (He was the one in charge.) What they wanted was to be (next to the one) who was in charge. Jesus could be the main guy. (They had no problem with that.) They just wanted to be the mains guys next to the main guy. That was their request.

Mark tells us, "When the ten heard about this (the other disciples), they were indignant with James and John." (They were angry.) And they were angry not because of what (those two) had said to Jesus, (knowing he was going to die), that they had made such a foolish and (untimely) request. No, they were angry because of what that request (from those two) would mean for the other ten.

Can't you just hear it? "If James and John end up on the right and the left, then (that means) we won't. And who are they to think that they should and we shouldn't? If someone's going to end up on top, then why should it be them and not be us?"

And (all of this) is being written by Mark about two of Jesus' closest followers, James and John, of which Peter was the third. If any, among the twelve, should have been able to get along and understand, you'd think that these three would have been the ones. But they didn't and they hadn't, and so this first-century food fight (with words) breaks out.

And that's when Jesus does what Jesus does best. He takes what is the norm in the world and turns it upside down. He takes what everyone considers to be a (certain way) and an (established way) and he turns it all around. And he does it with four little words. Four little words: "Not so with you...not so with you."

Verse 42, (Mark says), "Jesus called them together and said, 'You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them,' (that's what they do) "and their high officials exercise authority over them." (That's what they do, as well.) "Not so with you" (Jesus said). "Instead, whoever wants to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all." (And then comes the punch line.) "For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."

"Not so with you...Not even so with the Son of Man." If it's not the case with Jesus, why should they (or we) think it would be any different for us? Let's talk about next steps in our faith walk with Jesus. Let's talk about application in life and what this might mean.

There are a couple things in this conversation that are important. One is that every one of those disciples were (at one point) in their future going to be in charge. (They all were.) They would all (except for one) become leaders in the church. They would all (except for one) have opportunity to be on top. And their leadership (in the church) would set the stage for the church. Their leadership (in the church) would become the model after which (other leaders) in the church (after them) would lead.

The second is that Jesus, who was obviously their leader, was not just their leader, but was God himself. Jesus was God in the flesh. Jesus (when he came to this earth) was God as a person.

And so, if Jesus, as God as a person, would choose to lead (his followers) as a servant, then how could they (as his followers), in trying to imitate him, (“on the way”) choose to lead in any other way? The answer is they couldn’t, not if they wanted to be his followers. The answer is, neither can we if we want to be (on the same path) as Christ.

Jesus is telling us that when that happens, here’s what needs to happen. When the time comes for you to be in charge, to become the one who is given the opportunity to lead, then you need to become the one who does not miss the opportunity to serve.

What Jesus is saying is simple. (We all know how it works.) In the world, when you’re in charge, the ones under you work for you. In the world, if you’re the one with authority (over others) and in control, then your job is to use your authority to control the ones under your authority.

“Not so with you,” Jesus says. “Not so if you’re one of my followers.” If you’re a follower of Jesus, it’s all turned upside down. As followers of Jesus, rather than using our authority (over others) for the sake of ourselves, we are to leverage our authority for the sake of those under our authority.

In other words, the more authority you have in your position (over others), the more responsible you are (in your position) to use the authority (you have) for those others. That’s what Jesus did as God in the flesh. That’s what we are to do as we strive to imitate him.

Go down the list. (It’s not hard to follow.) You don’t have to be the “big boss” for this to fit. If you’re a parent, it fits. As a parent, you have authority over your kids. As a parent, you are the one who is in charge. If you are doing it right (as a parent) you are the one who calls the shots.

At the same time (in your parenting), you have a responsibility that’s built in. You are the one responsible for the ones under your authority. What Jesus says is that you are to use your authority (as a parent) for the sake of those under your authority (your children). That’s your calling. That’s what you’re to do.

Keep going. It’s the same thing as a spouse. I don’t know who is (the one) in charge in your relationship. I don’t know how each of you has this marriage-thing set up. Ideally (in a marriage), no one is “in charge.” It’s a team effort. It’s an equal partnership.

At the same time, when it is your call to make, your opportunity to exercise whatever authority you have, (in your marriage), your call is to leverage that authority for the good and the wellbeing of your spouse.

It’s the same thing in school. If you’re a student (in school), and you have a chance to make a difference, then (your calling) is to use the chance you have (to make a difference), and not just for yourself, but for your classmates and friends.

You don’t have to be the leader for this to fit. It fits (in different ways) for all of us. Even if you’re not the leader, we all have times in life when we are called to lead. (We all do.)

But if you are the leader and even if you are the “big boss”, as a Christian, it’s the same thing. And it’s the same thing because your “Big Boss” has done that for you, all the way to the cross.

“Not so with you.” This isn’t one of those teachings (from Jesus) that’s hard to understand. It’s rather straightforward. But it may well be one of those teachings that’s hard to apply. (And so let me put it this way, and this is how I’ll close.)

And this is one of the paradoxes of the Christian faith. It’s one of the teachings (from the life and ministry) of Jesus that when (turned upside-down) makes it all right-side-up. And, again, this all goes back to the way Jesus lived, to what he was willing (as the Son of God) to do for us. He gave his life so we could have life. He sacrificed his authority that you and I might have a chance.

And so, here’s how it works. If I’m the one in authority (and you know it) and I use my authority to do what is best for me, then the only one who can (look out for you) is you. And you know that, too.

And so, what do you do? You do what you need to do for the one who is in authority (for me), but (in doing what you’re doing) for me, you always have in mind what’s best for you, because the only one who has in

mind (what's best for you) is you. And so you need to always have in mind what's best for you, because no else will ever have in mind what's best for you, only you. That's what happens, and that's what (we see) and find so often in the world. (Everyone is looking out for themselves.)

But here's the paradox. Here's how (and why) Jesus turns this all upside-down, and here's what God want to see (and to find) in us. What God wants to see (and to find) in us, is not just what's best for you (or for me), but for us. That's what he wants: what's best for us.

And so, how does that happen. It happens when what's best for me is not my first priority. My first priority is what's best for you. And so when I do what's best for you, you win. You're the winner when I do what's best for you. That's what God wants.

And when you do the same (and this is how this works) and your first priority is not in your own self-interest, but in the interest of others, the one who wins is not you, but others. They're the winners when you do what's best for them. And, again, that's what God wants.

Now, put that all together, and it all comes together. As followers of Jesus, when I do what's best for you (and you win), and you do what's best for others (and we win), then I win and you win and we all win. And when we all win, we all win. And that's the kingdom. That's what God wants.

And that's the paradox: because it all begins with Jesus, (of all places), on the cross; and it all carries on in us, (in all places), "on the way," and not our way, but his. Not in our own self-interest, but in the interest of others. "Not so with you...and all for him." Amen.