

SHAKY SERVANTS OF THE LORD

Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

On Sunday, February 4, 1968, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. preached at the Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta. He was co-pastor there with his father, “Daddy” King. His sermon that day was called “The Drum Major Instinct,” based on this story about James and John asking Jesus, “Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory.” In his sermon, Dr. King described those two disciples as having a “drum major instinct — a desire to be out front, a desire to lead the parade.” He also noted that Jesus did not rebuke the brothers for their ambition, but for their desire for glory and power. He said, “Jesus reordered priorities and told his disciples to keep feeling the need for being first. But I want you to be first in love.”

Also in his sermon that Sunday, Dr. King told the congregation that he would like it said at his funeral that Martin Luther King, Jr. tried to love somebody. As he ended his sermon, he imagined his own funeral and encouraged them not to emphasize many of his achievements, including winning the Nobel Peace Prize. Instead, he asked them to remember how he tried to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, and comfort prisoners. “Yes,” he preached, “if you want to say that I was a drum major, say that I was a drum major for justice. Say that I was a drum major for peace. I was a drum major for righteousness. And all of the other shallow things will not matter.” Two months later, to the day, Dr. King was murdered in Memphis. At his nationally televised funeral on Tuesday, April 9, 1968, excerpts from his drum major sermon were played.¹

If you’re thinking that I’m preaching the same sermon again that I preached on September 12 and September 19, I can assure you that I’m not! But I can’t really blame you, because the story line is the same:

- * Jesus and his disciples are on the road to Jerusalem.

- * Jesus tells his disciples what’s going to happen to him when they get there (he’s going to be handed over to the religious leaders and the Romans, be crucified, die, and rise again).

- * The disciples don’t get what Jesus is talking about.

- * Jesus teaches them what it means to be one of his followers.

Remember?

Episode #1: On the way Jesus asked his disciples, “Who do people say that I am?” Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. And Peter took him aside and rebuked him. (Mark 8:27-32)

Episode #2: They passed through Galilee. He was teaching them that the Son of Man was going to be betrayed into human hands, be killed, and rise again. And further along the way, the disciples argued with one another about who was the greatest. (Mark 9:30-34)

Episode #3: They were on the road, going up to Jerusalem. Jesus told the disciples what was going to happen to him. He would be handed over to the chief priests and the scribes and condemned to death, then handed over to the Gentiles and abused and killed, and he would rise again. And James and John then asked Jesus, “Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you. Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory.” (Mark 10:32-37)

And Jesus’s answer every time is the same: If you want to be great, you can’t be the drum major, out front trying to lead the parade. Follow me! Here’s how he describes what it means to follow our ambition for greatness in the kingdom of God: Deny ourselves; Take up our crosses; Follow him; Lose our lives for his sake and the sake of the gospel; Want to be first? You must be last; Welcome a child in my name; Receive the kingdom of God as a child; Many who are first will be last, and the last will be first; Want to be great? Be a servant of all; Want to be first? Be a slave of all; Don’t expect to be served, but to serve.

In a sermon called “Good News?” William Willimon says, “Jesus promises his disciples not that they shall be in glory with him, rewarded and happy. He promises that if they will follow him they shall share with him in his sufferings and challenges.” Then Bishop Willimon gets to the heart of the matter for all of us shaky servants of the Lord: “This is the message that contemporary followers of Jesus have been reluctant to proclaim to the world, perhaps because we’re reluctant to hear this message ourselves! Jesus is not a technique for getting what we want out of God; Jesus is God’s way of getting what God wants out of us. God wants a world, a world redeemed, restored to God. And the way God gets that is with ordinary people like us who are willing to walk like Jesus, talk like Jesus, yes, and even if need be to suffer like Jesus.” To help us visualize what he is talking about, he asks, “Ever seen a church with a sign our front that read, ‘Come! Be Crucified! We’ve Got a Cross that Fits Your Back, Too!’”²

No, I didn’t think so — neither have I.

Back to the brothers James and John. Maybe they were still basking in all of Jesus’s glory that they experienced up on the mountain of transfiguration. Even Peter (who, if anyone could be thought of as the #1 disciple, certainly is) wanted to stay up there where things were pretty great. Remember what Peter said? “Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.” (Mark 9:2-8) Honestly, who could blame him for wanting to stay up there and prolong the mountaintop experience? After all, that happened right after Jesus rebuked him and said, “For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.” (Mark 8:35) Of course, they didn’t stay up on the mountain, because they couldn’t stay up on the

mountain, because “the Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.” (Mark 10:45)

“Let scripture interpret scripture” is important and helpful advice when you’re trying to understand what some Bible verses mean. On Wednesday, I sent Bill and Cheryl emails and asked them to change today’s epistle lesson from Romans 12:1-8 to Philippians 2:1-11. Now, there is nothing wrong with Romans 12:1-8. It’s all about the new life in Christ, and Paul cautions us “not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think” (Romans 12:3). But it’s as if Paul had in mind all of Jesus’s teachings about greatness coming from service when he encouraged the Philippian Christian to imitate Christ’s humility. Listen again: “Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death — even death on a cross.” (Philippians 2:3-8) In a nutshell, Mark 10:45 summarizes what Paul tells us about who Jesus is and what Jesus did — “For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.”

In 1911, the Rotary Clubs in the United States held their second national convention in Portland, Oregon. While on an outing on the Columbia River, two Rotarians — Ben Collins, president of the Minneapolis club and J.E. Pinkham from the Seattle club — talked about the best way to organize a Rotary Club. Collins told Pinkham that his club had adopted the organizing principle of “Service, Not Self.” The founder of Rotary, Paul Harris, was also on that excursion and Pinkham invited him to join the conversation. Paul Harris asked Mr. Collins to address the convention on that principle. His speech was well received. In 1950, at the Rotary International Convention in Detroit, “Service Above Self” was approved as one of two official mottoes of Rotary. It became the main motto in 1989 because, according to Rotary International, “it best conveys the philosophy of unselfish volunteer service.”³

“Service, Not Self . . . Service Above Self” has served Rotary well as its organizing principle for over one hundred years. If you’re looking for an organizing principle for your Christian life, Jesus offers these: “Whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all.” That certainly doesn’t meet the world’s standards, 2,000 years ago until today — “You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them.” (Mark 10:42)

James and John are good examples of how easy it is to get lured in by the ways of the world in terms of greatness and power and authority and acclaim. And when the Romans nailed Jesus to the cross, it certainly must have seemed that the world’s ways had won. Even the disciples were dismayed and heartbroken and, to be honest, probably terrified of what would happen next. On top of that, they had all abandoned Jesus,

the one they had promised to serve. They abandoned him at the very time he served them and us to the very end.

But, you know what? Jesus didn't abandon his shaky servants all along the way to Jerusalem when they didn't get what he was talking about. Nor did Jesus abandon his shaky disciples after he was raised from the dead and commissioned to go out and serve in his name. And Jesus doesn't abandon us as his shaky servants — even when we succumb to the temptation to make ourselves great at the expense of others. It's a matter of priorities — that's why I found the graphic in today's bulletin so helpful:



One more story from William Willimon. He writes, “Back when I was at Duke Chapel, I once lamented to a group of students that we attracted so few students in our services on Sunday at Duke Chapel. ‘Go easy on yourself,’ said one of the students. ‘Duke is a very selective school with very bright students,’ she said. (I’m thinking, ‘Yeah, bright but not all that humble.’) ‘I think most of them are smart enough to figure out,’ she continued, ‘that if they gave their lives to Christ, he would only make their lives more difficult. I think it’s amazing you get as many students to come to Jesus as you do.’ And I thought of Jesus: ‘You will drink my cup, you will be baptized with my baptism.’ And that’s the Good News.”⁴

And I’m going to end my sermon with the prayer William Willimon used to end his sermon:

Let us pray: Jesus, help us to hear you. Help us to hear your challenging — sometimes bad — news as our good news. Help us to hear your voice as our summons. Help us to take up your cross daily and walk where you lead. Amen.

NOTES

¹The Martin Luther King, Jr. Research and Education Institute, “Drum Major Instinct,” February 4, 1968 at kinginstitute.stanford.edu.

²William H. Willimon, “Good News?” October 18, 2009 at www.day1.org.

³Rotary History, “Rotary’s two official mottoes,” at www.rotary.org.

⁴Willimon, *ibid.*