

The Perfect Church

First Congregational United Church of Christ
Eagle River, Wisconsin
October 21, 2018

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Text: Mark 10:35-45

Over the past several weeks of lectionary readings, with the exception of a brief detour into the book of Job two weeks ago, we have been following Jesus “on the way.” When Mark uses this phrase “on the way,” he means it literally—Jesus is on the way to Jerusalem—and he also means it figuratively and spiritually—Jesus is on the way to fulfilling his destiny; he’s on the way to his death and resurrection; he’s playing out his role in the drama of salvation.

Although this journey on the way is a lonely one—only Jesus can make it—he is never alone during the course of it, even when he wants to be. He’s constantly in the midst of a crowd of people: the curious, the skeptical, the judgmental and self-righteous, the hungry, the sick or possessed, the desperate. And he’s always with his disciples, that motley group that Jesus chose, and who, in turn, chose to follow him.

So, if we’re making this journey with Jesus, who are we among this colorful cast of characters? Each of you probably needs to answer that question for yourself, but I’d venture to say that most of us who are members of the church move back and forth between these various categories. We’d like to consider ourselves to be disciples of Christ, followers of Jesus, but there are times when we also prefer to be detached observers, or doubtful spectators, or sometimes desperate supplicants.

We want to be followers of Jesus, but there are also times when we'd like to keep our options open.

Much of what we've read and pondered in Mark over these past weeks has revolved around conversations between Jesus and those disciples of his. These conversations really began with that crucial question that Jesus posed to the twelve in Caesarea Philippi, "Who do you say that I am?" You'll remember that Peter alone offered the right answer, "You are the Messiah." But you'll also remember that Peter was unable to understand the implications of his correct response. When Jesus told him that being the Messiah meant that he, Jesus, would have to suffer and die, Peter argued with Jesus and was then rebuked by him, "Get behind me Satan, for you have no idea how God works."

Jesus was to tell the disciples twice more what it meant that he was the Messiah. After his second warning about what would happen to him, Jesus caught his disciples "arguing on the way," in hot dispute as to who was the greatest among them. After the third, James and John, the two disciples who along with Peter formed Jesus' inner circle, asked for positions of privilege when Jesus came into his glory. "Put us at your right hand and at your left hand," they asked.

It's this third conversation that we're focusing on today. It's interesting that in Matthew's account of the same episode, it isn't James and John who ask Jesus for privileged positions, it's their mother who does it for them. (Yes, you're right, we *always* blame the mother.) But Matthew was written after Mark, perhaps as many as twenty years later, and it's reasonable to suggest that Matthew shifted the blame to the men's mother because by the time Matthew wrote, James and John were considered to be more than disciples; they were apostles, and as such they were among the first bishops of the church. It was bad enough that one of the original

twelve, Judas, was a snake. But now to have two apostles close to Jesus, two future church leaders, behaving pettily and self-importantly? Heaven forbid.

It's a troubling thought, isn't it? The Gospels tell us, repeatedly, that our original ancestors in the faith, the founders of the church, Jesus' disciples, the ones who knew him better than anyone else could, these disciples repeatedly didn't get the suffering and dying, and the servanthood thing.

It's troubling, because 2,000 years later, after 2,000 years of Christian teaching, we still usually don't get it either. We're still looking for those worldly rewards for following Jesus. In Damascus, Syria, on the Street Called Straight, there are buildings only a few blocks apart called patriarchates. They're called patriarchates because patriarchs live in them. The Patriarchs in Damascus—I think there are five of them—all carry the same title: Patriarch of Antioch and All the East. Pretty impressive, huh? There are so many of them because early on in its history the church fragmented in so many different directions. But before we start feeling all superior toward these guys, we should think of the number of different churches, of different denominations, here in our community and those nearby. Then project that across the country and the world. If Middle Eastern Christians invented schism and division, we in the West have perfected it. Our denominationalism is rooted in the pride and stubbornness that has divided the church from the very beginning.

I once was on a flight from Beirut to Cyprus with two of these Patriarchs of Antioch and All the East, one Greek Orthodox, the other Syrian Orthodox. It's a very short flight—about 45 minutes—but both of these men, in their full regalia, sat in the First Class section of the airplane. The encouraging thing was that they were actually talking amiably with each other. (I could see them from *my* seat in tourist class.) When we arrived at the airport in Cyprus, one of them had the good

fortune and advance planning of having a limousine waiting for him on the tarmac at plane side. He turned to his traveling companion, his fellow patriarch and brother in the faith, bowed slightly, got into the limo, slammed the door, and off the big black car went, leaving the other patriarch to take the airport bus to the airline terminal with the rest of us commoners. “Jesus, when you come to your glory, we want to sit at your right hand and at your left.” Or in the big black car.

As we read the accounts of Jesus’ conversations with his disciples, and we observe the contemporary behavior of those who would be Jesus’ disciples, we should remember that the disciples are the church, and the church is us. Jesus’ response to the special pleading of James and John, those two ambitious disciples is, all things considered, remarkably gentle, and at the same time probing. He asks them, “Are you really are able to drink the cup that I myself will have to drink? Can you undergo the baptism by which I will be baptized?” Both baptism and communion, the two sacraments of the church, carry in them the symbolism of death and rebirth. Paul says that we are buried with Jesus when we enter the waters of baptism and that we’re also raised with him through faith. When we rise from the baptismal waters, we arise to new life from the death of the old life. When we drink of the cup, we remember Jesus’ shedding of his blood and the new covenant that he promises in that blood. So it’s not privilege that Jesus offers, it’s radical change—it’s the agonizing death of that old life and the promise of new life in him.

It will be this common experience of baptism and communion—not the ritual itself but the reality behind the ritual—that will transform the disciples from the short-sighted and self-interested slugs that they appear to be in the passages we’ve been reading. It transforms them and us to becoming apostles, to becoming the church, to becoming the body of Christ. “Yes, we can undergo your baptism. Yes, we can

drink of your cup. Yes, we can be your body in the world,” they and, I hope we, tell Jesus.

Jesus tells them and us that in return he can't promise positions of privilege and power; he can't promise positions to his right and to his left. In fact, the next time Mark refers to anyone's being on Jesus' right and his left, it's the two thieves who were crucified beside Jesus on Calvary--not in positions of privilege and reflected glory, but in positions of utmost humiliation and impending death. To be at the left and right of Jesus is to be beside him on the cross. But Jesus promises us that death never has the final word.

So where does all of this leave us as the church, as successors of the disciples? Well, the disciples are stubborn, short-sighted, dense and prideful. And so are we, their successors in the church. Like them, we continue to ask the wrong questions and to disbelieve the right answers. And we can be hypocritical in ways that others in our society cannot be--by covering our hypocrisy with the misuse of God's name.

So, in answer to the question you might have formulated in your own minds when you saw the title of today's sermon, no, there is no perfect church.

There is no perfect church because there are no perfect people. I have my own confession to make. I am guilty of the sin of impatience. I am impatient with critics of the church who themselves won't take the plunge of commitment to the church, those who say that they don't go to church because so many church people are two-faced and hypocritical. One such person told Dwight Moody that he wouldn't join his church because it was filled with hypocrites. Moody replied, "Don't worry. There's always room for one more."

Not being part of the church because the church is flawed is like not voting because some politicians are scoundrels. I know of no other institution than the church—in government or in business, and no other voluntary organization--that has, as a regular and required part of its meetings a confession of its shortcomings. Oh yes, we know of politicians who “take responsibility” for “mistakes that were made” (note the use of the passive voice), but they’re also the ones who say that even though they take responsibility, they didn’t do anything wrong. Christians know that the only one who truly and finally takes responsibility for something he didn’t do is Jesus. If we Christians really confess as we should, then we *know* that we did something wrong. And though we in the church sometimes confess perfunctorily and almost by rote, we know better. We confess our sins to remind ourselves of them, and to be called to account by the scriptures.

And I know of no other institution than the church that so earnestly seeks meaning in life through service, no other institution that has as a regular part of its agenda the ritual and reality of sharing and of mutual sacrifice. As William Sloane Coffin put it, “The Church, of all the institutions in society interprets the memory and proclaims the message of the coming kingdom The Church may distort or pervert Jesus’ image, but the Church cannot forget Jesus. And in spite of its best efforts to domesticate Jesus, the Church knows and frequently fears that his message will be rediscovered. The Church cannot help but keep Jesus’ name in circulation, and where the name is remembered, there is hope.”

If we can’t find or be the perfect church, we can seek to be the faithful church. We may be disillusioned by the church, but if we accept the reality of our own sin—and we should—we also recognize that Jesus never gave us permission to have illusions, illusions about ourselves, or about the people who make up the church. At the conclusion of today’s passage from Mark, Jesus reminds his disciples once again that he came into their midst and into our world not to be served, but to

serve. And that he came to give his life for the ransom of many, not for the privilege of a few. A ransom is what is paid to free a captive. Jesus frees us from our captivity to the sin of self-importance, frees us despite all our faults, despite our obtuseness, even despite our resistance to freedom. Jesus frees us, flawed as we are, to offer hope to those who have given up, to love the seemingly unlovable, to offer our lives and our substance so that others may live and live more abundantly. Not the perfect church, but a Church that, when it's at its best, strives to be faithful, faithful to the One who has set us free.

Amen.