

**Rev. Adrienne Meier**  
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**Saint Thomas Evangelical Lutheran Church, Bloomington, Indiana**

### **Set Free**

#### **Mark 10:35-45, NRSV, emended**

James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came forward to Jesus and said to him, "Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you." And he said to them, "What is it you want me to do for you?" And they said, "Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory." Then Jesus said to them, "You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?" They replied, "We are able." Jesus said, "The cup that I drink you will drink; and with the baptism that I am baptized with you will be baptized. But to sit at my right hand or at my left is not mine to grant. It is for those for whom it has been prepared." When the ten heard of this, they began to be angry with James and John. So Jesus called them and said to them, "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; but it is not so among you. For whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many."

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There is, in my family, a story of my great-great-grandfather, a Union soldier in the Civil War. Late in the war, he was captured and imprisoned at Andersonville prisoner in Georgia. One day, there was a prisoner exchange, and an older prisoner gave my great-grandfather some old bandages, so he could fake an injury. Wounded soldiers, who would not be able to immediately rejoin the battle, were often the first traded, and with his "injury," so it was with my great-great grandfather. He went home to Pennsylvania, and by the time he was headed back to his regiment, the war was over. The other prisoner's name is long forgotten, but the freedom he gave is not. That is the Good News, at its heart: it is in being set free and in setting others free.

Today's gospel reading is about how the disciples respond to Jesus telling them for a third time that he is going to be arrested, mocked, spit upon, flogged, killed, and *then* he will rise. Every time—every single time—Jesus tells the disciples this, they take it badly. First, Peter, who had just confessed him as Messiah, takes him aside to rebuke him. The next time, the disciples argue about who is the greatest. Today, the bravado of James and John is...intense. One commentator I read this week suggested they were like novice soldiers preparing for battle. They're already planning their own ticker-tape parade. They want to be in the lead car; they want to be on the float with Jesus. They want it to be clear that *they* were pivotal in winning the battle. Each time Jesus tells them what is really going to happen, each time the disciples write him off, miss the point; each of these exchanges

show how often we're mistaken about what the Reign of God could be like; each time Jesus rejects what they're trying to project onto his kin-dom.

Jesus rejects the idea that the Messiah was a militaristic conqueror, fated to defeat and subdue Israel's enemies. Instead, he says, God's kin-dom is about taking up your cross, about loosing your life; the Messiah is not a victorious general, but, a suffering servant. Jesus rejects the disciples' illusions of grandeur, their ideas of reversing—but still preserving—the social ladder. Instead, Jesus teaches that true greatness is becoming the servant of all, the truly great are those who welcome nobodies as equals. This time, Jesus rejects ticker-tape parades, celebrating the victors, memorializing those who secured their own freedom—no matter the collateral damage. Instead, the kin-dom of God is about setting others free, giving one's life as a ransom for many.

When we talk about what happens in the cross, we talk about atonement. This last verse, that the son of humanity came to give his life as a ransom for many, is often used to justify substitutionary atonement. Substitutionary atonement is the idea that God demands payment for sin, and Jesus is that payment, the sacrificial lamb of the new covenant. This is, of course, the main atonement theory most of us grew up with, with God demanding his pound of flesh for our mistakes, standing by silently as his only begotten son pays for errors. There is a time and a place, perhaps, for substitutionary atonement, but there are so many other, beautiful ways of understanding the cross. Substitutionary atonement assumes the old system of ritual sacrifice, just with Jesus substituted for the lamb. The trouble is, this verse doesn't say that Jesus is the sacrificial lamb—that's more John's speed, than Mark's. In this verse, Jesus is talking about ransom, about the money given in order to set hostages free; about the trades made to bring home prisoners of war. In Mark's gospel, God isn't some cigar-smoking gangster beating people up for payment. In Mark's gospel, God is the one who sets people free. Not from God's wrath, but from everything that binds us: from self-centeredness, from afflictions of the body and the soul, from the law which demands more from some than others, from our stuff and other idols that will never save us or set us free.

Truly, much of Luther's works sound like this demanded payment, but Luther struggle to reconcile a vengeful God with the self-sacrifice of Jesus on the cross. When Luther writes about baptism, he says, baptism "signifies the old person in us with all sins and evil desires is to be drowned and die through daily sorrow for sin and through repentance, and on the other hand that daily a new person is to come forth and rise up to live before God in righteousness and purity forever." Not that God demands payment, but that, in Christ—in Christ alone—we are set free from our selfishness, we are set from systems that oppress us, we are set free from self-harm and hatred, and we are set free for the pleasure of God and the sake of our neighbor in order to work with God in the right-side-upping of the world.

Every time Jesus tells us what to expect, every time he tells us what is going to happen to him, he immediately follows it with a teaching designed to set us free from our own self-

centeredness in order that we can truly follow him, in order that we can join him in setting others free. This cycle of prediction, misunderstanding, hard teaching is bookended by stories of Jesus setting people free from blindness, and in between these stories, he welcomes children, preaches about marriage, and tells a rich young man what is really holding him back from eternal life. Time and time again, Jesus makes clear that what is to come is not going to simply “flip the script,” where the disciples and Jesus’s followers will simply take the power and influence they have coveted for so long, and force into lowness those who have hoarded power. No, the kin-dom of God will be one where believers outdo one another in service, in building one another up, in seeking—not power *over*, but—community *with*. This kin-dom is still so foreign to us, still so far away, but it is still the truth for which our heart longs.

Pr. Dan Erlander calls the people of God the point-less people—a lovely play on words the points-less people. He says the great trick of the devil was in tempting us to keep score, to tally our points, to make the purpose of our lives—the point of our lives—winning more than anyone else. Rather than cooperate, we compete. Rather than give, we hoard. Rather than form community, we prepare for battle. The truth of Jesus, the heart of the Good News is the promise that the points don’t matter. The kin-dom isn’t a flipped ladder, it isn’t that the powerless become the powerful, it is that all the joy and meaning in the world is found in outdoing one another in kindness, it is in finding the tangled knots of marginalization in the world and undoing them. It is in breaking the shackles of oppression. It is in going without for the sake of solidarity. It is in being set free from our self-centeredness, in order to work with God to bring about the freedom of the whole world.

Amen.