

You Don't Know What You Ask

Sermon 116 | Greystone Baptist Church | October 17, 2021

Mark 10:35-45

Last weekend my family and I had planned to be camping at Falls Lake with some good friends. We booked adjacent sites months ago and had been getting the kids excited about fishing, hiking, s'mores, and waking up to the sounds of nature. When the summer nights started to feel a little cooler, we all got even more excited about the trip because everyone knows there's really not much better in life than a fall evening in the woods with people you love. But as the dates drew near the forecast began to show that our long-awaited vacation in the woods wasn't going to look exactly like we'd planned. The day before we were supposed to set up camp, my friend and I had a conversation we had both been praying we wouldn't have to have.

"Looks like rain all weekend," she said.

"Yup." I responded. "What do you want to do?"

Silence.

Neither one of us were ready to let the idea of getting together go, just because of some rain. But at the same time, the idea of setting up a tent and a pop-up camper for three kids, two dogs, and four adults just didn't seem like the relaxing weekend we had been planning.

"I've been thinking..." I offered up, unsure if she'd go for it, "What if we set up our big tent in the playroom and let the kids 'camp' in there all weekend? We can sleep in our beds and maybe cook some fun recipes and relax at the house? Would y'all be willing to drive to Raleigh for that?"

She thought for a moment before responding with, "Let me see what Bryan thinks... I'll let you know."

It wasn't what any of us had planned. It wasn't even anything special really. Just four old friends, three kids, and two dogs, locked up in an average house while the rain poured down outside. But the smells of Belgian waffles, raspberry jam cooking on the stove, and fresh sourdough bread baking in the oven filled the kitchen and offered up a wholly different kind of reunion than we had in mind. Even better, the kids, who haven't seen one another in nearly two years, had the time of their lives. Their feet drummed loud rhythms on the second story floor as they ran from one end of the house to the other. At times, it tempted us – the adults – to holler up, "y'all tone it down up there!"

But despite the usual urge to quiet the chaos, I found myself longing for a pause button to stop time for just a moment, to elongate this rare occasion of gathering with good friends, something to prevent the inevitable end of the weekend from arriving so soon, something to keep the kids young and the parents from getting too much older, something to ensure that *this* moment might last forever.

I wanted a pause button so that I wouldn't have to accept that goodbye hugs were coming on Sunday morning, that school and workdays loomed just around the corner, and that there was no telling what life might throw at us once this brief retreat from routine was over.

I suspect we all feel this way from time to time, we want to pause time so that we can remain in the joy of life's best moments. Or maybe it isn't a pause button, but a fast forward when things are hard and we just want to get it over with. Or maybe it's a rewind if we think our better days are all behind us. No matter what the desire, to live in the best of times is something we can all relate to.

In the movie, *Click*, Michael Newman, played by Adam Sandler, actually gets a chance to try it out. While shopping at a Bed Bath and Beyond store, Newman is approached by a mysterious man and offered a free remote control for his life – the only caveat is that it can never be returned. Newman uses the remote to his advantage at work, causing mischief and to fast forward when illness strikes. Using the remote allows him to speed through life's most mundane and painful moments, avoiding them as he lives most of life on auto-pilot. Meanwhile, he is freed up to focus on work – earning money and getting ahead.

All the while Michael Newman seems to be literally *living his best life*, the audience begins to get a sense that things aren't quite as *good* as they seem.

It seems as if Newman didn't really know what he was asking for when he took hold of that remote.

Sometimes James and John – well really all the disciples – get a bad rep in Mark's Gospel because they never seem to fully understand what Jesus is about. Today's reading is no different. Throughout the whole Gospel Jesus has been telling them where this thing is headed. The tension between Jesus and the authorities has been escalating. Jesus knows that this kind of conflict doesn't usually end well for the reformer, the one offering a new way of life, an alternative kingdom. It's so prominent in Mark's Gospel that scholars identify this conflict between Jesus and the authorities as one of the most central themes of the entire Gospel, and yet here, the disciples appear not to understand.

Like the Keystone Kops¹ who never could seem to get their act together, on the surface, James and John are fumbling around, asking questions that seem to give away their ignorance. Even though Jesus has predicted his passion three times before, like children asking for dessert before dinnertime, the brothers ask to be given a place of honor, next to Jesus. Ironically, the ones who will ultimately be on the right and on the left of Jesus are the criminals whose crosses will rise on the hill of Golgotha.

It appears that James and John don't know what they're asking.

On the other hand, maybe they have heard Jesus' warnings about his own fate. Maybe they do understand that being a follower of Jesus will come with a cost. Maybe it isn't ignorance but rather, fear that is driving them to ask such a question. Maybe what these two are looking for isn't about their own place of prominence and recognition but rather just some reassurance that it will all be worth it in the end. "Maybe James and John are not just power hungry;" maybe they are just acting quite naturally on their own fears.²

If Jesus continued on his trajectory, and if things happened the way Jesus said they would, the reality facing the disciples looked quite grim. It would only be natural for them to be afraid. If they were to drink from the same cup – as friends sharing a meal around a table. If they were to share in the same baptism, a baptism of repentance and complete allegiance to God's Kingdom rather than the Kingdom of Rome... Isn't it rather clear that if they shared all of this with Jesus, that they would also bear the same cross?

Maybe James and John *knew* where they were headed but just wanted a universal remote control in order to fast forward through the pain and suffering that lay ahead.

They both seem like viable options to me, based on what I've learned about being human. Whether they kind of knew that it wasn't going to end well for Jesus *or* if they were just trying to secure their own place of glory and recognition, the two ask for something they think they want.

Their question reveals an inner longing to skip over the more difficult moments in order to relish in the victory, in the success, in the healing, in the winning. They want the gain without the pain.

And while we also can certainly understand this inner desire, what we sometimes fail to recognize is that in our efforts to bypass the discomfort, we centralize ourselves in God's story of new creation. As we seek to move from one comfortable seat to another, we fail to see the suffering and injustice that is happening all around us – all for the sake of ourselves. We are looking for God to serve us when we ought to be looking for ways that we can serve God.

Do we really know what we are saying when we say we want to follow Jesus or are we just looking to ensure our own eternal comfort?

Do we know what we are asking for when we ask to share his cup, to share his baptism...

Do we really know what we are asking when we say we want to share the cross?

Michael Newman, Adam Sandler's character in the movie, *Click*, learned the hard way. After using the remote control to fast forward, rewind, and pause life for his own advantage and comfort, he found himself at the end of his life with money and a certain measure of success, but without any relationships at all. His kids moved on without him,

² Charles L. Campbell. *Feasting on the Word, Year B Vol. 4*, 191.

his wife had divorced him and found another man. After missing out on the pain, after skipping past all the mundane moments of ordinary life, Newman discovered that he had missed out on everything that really mattered, his life was devoid of relationship because he'd passed right through the moments where connections could be forged.

About half way through 2020, when so many were navigating stay at home orders and the world waited for vaccines, some folks started posting comments like: "let's just cook a turkey, put up a tree, and call this year done!" We were all ready to get on with things, just knowing that the next year would be better. But as the months drug on, we began to realize that the pandemic wasn't just a pause button, it wasn't something we would just bounce right back from. There would be no "resume" button to take us back to where we were. Instead, we have experienced not a pause but a full stop. A death of things as they used to be. It has been full of pain, full of loss, full of grief, and full suffering.

And though it may be tempting to fast forward through seasons like this one, the reality is that it is precisely through these seasons that new life becomes possible. Resurrection is not possible without the cross.

In the movie, Michael Newman realizes this when it's almost too late.

In the Gospel, James and John wrestle with it as they work to secure their own role in the story of God that is unfolding before them in the life of Jesus.

And for us... there is a tremendous opportunity to recognize that it is often in the moments of pain, struggle, and discomfort that God works to bring about something new. In these experiences – the ones that we would often want to fast forward through, or skip over by rewinding to a previous scene that was more comfortable, more joyful, more pleasant – in our experiences of brokenness and vulnerability we are able to show up for one another, to recognize that the bigger story isn't always about us, and that sometimes... when we try to avoid the uncomfortable conversation, the painful things that are unfolding in our world, or the sacrifice that we know we need to make for the good of our neighbors, when we ask God to help us skip over this stuff and get on to more pleasant times...
...we don't really know what we're asking.

So rather than trying to bypass the pain, the brokenness, and the discomfort ... why don't we give back the "remote", so to speak, and allow God to work through us and walk with us all the way to the cross - recognizing that even though it feels like death, like loss, like grief... like the end...

In God's story, the end is just the beginning!