

SERMON: Be Careful What You Pray For
TEXT: Mark 10:35-45

10-17-21

On the far-away Island of Sala-ma-Sond, Yertle the Turtle was king of the pond. A nice little pond. It was clean. It was neat. The water was warm. There was plenty to eat. The turtles had everything turtles might need. And they were all happy. Quite happy indeed.

Does anyone remember *Yertle the Turtle*, by Dr. Seuss? It's not one of his more popular stories, but it's one of my favorites from my childhood. And I'm tempted to read the whole story to you, as its message is very much like what I'm hearing in our scripture lesson from the Gospel of Mark.

You see, Yertle is the king of the pond and ruler over all the other turtles. But he is not content, and he begins to believe that his kingdom is too small. *"I'm ruler," said Yertle, "of all that I see. But I don't see enough. That's the trouble with me.... This throne that I sit on is too, too low down. It ought to be higher!" he said with a frown.*

Yertle's solution to his problem is to build a tower - a new throne - with the other turtles in the pond. Now he can see much further. *"All mine!" Yertle cried.*

“Oh the things I now rule! I’m king of a cow! I’m king of a mule!” But as he’s basking in his glory, he hears a voice. It’s coming from the turtle at the bottom of the stack, whose name is Mack.

“Beg your pardon, King Yertle. I’ve pains in my back and my shoulders and knees. How long must we stand here, Your Majesty, please?” Instead of showing compassion for Mack, Yertle decides to build his throne higher.

Mack complains once again, appealing for himself and the rights of the other turtles, as well. Yertle, once again, responds with arrogance and gloating that nothing is higher than he. But then he notices the moon in the sky and becomes determined to compete. *“I’ll call some more turtles. I’ll stack ‘em to heaven! I need ‘bout five thousand, six hundred and seven!”*

But before Yertle has a chance to give the command, that plain little Mack at the bottom of the stack burped! The whole tower came tumbling down. *Well, that was the end of the Turtle King’s rule! For Yertle, the King of all Sala-ma-Sond, fell off his high throne and fell Plunk! in the pond!*

There are a number of good lessons in this story, not the least of which is,
BE CAREFUL WHAT YOU PRAY FOR.

The same can be said for James and John, who approached Jesus, saying, “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 glory.” It appears, as my mom would say, that they have gotten too big for their britches!

Up to this point, Jesus has been growing in popularity. He has fed a crowd of five thousand people. He has healed the sick, exorcised demons, calmed a storm, and raised the dead. Though his disciples have been by his side in all of these miracles, they can take no credit for making them happen or even assisting in the effort. By and large, they still don’t understand who Jesus is. They fail to grasp the meaning of his teachings. They miss the point of his ministry. And they turn a deaf ear when he talks of the suffering in store for him.

But they see the crowds growing larger, and they hear the praises of those who have experienced him. Like any of us would, they enjoy being closely connected with him when he’s getting all this positive attention. They are basking in his glory.

James and John clearly are vying for the top spots on Jesus' team. In the NIV Student Bible which we gave to our young people upon their confirmation last spring, I found this commentary on today's passage: "At the height of his popularity, as throngs of people are tailing him, Jesus talks about his forthcoming suffering and death. Such talk baffles his disciples, whose image of a Messiah includes no such dark notions. Showing incredible insensitivity, they lapse into disputes about status."

Jesus tries to set them straight. "You do not know what you are asking." In other words, BE CAREFUL WHAT YOU PRAY FOR. "Are you able to drink the cup that I drink," he challenges, "or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?"

I sometimes think Jesus should talk to the disciples as if they were four-year-olds. Certainly he knows by now how dense they are; why does he continue to use mysterious metaphors like the cup and baptism? I had to look it up again to remind myself what this meant.

One commentary referred to the cup shared with his disciples at the Last Supper. "The cup of wine represents the blood Jesus will shed to establish the new

covenant.” Remember, too, that Jesus prayed before he was arrested, “Abba, Father, everything is possible for you. Take this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will.” (Mark 14:36 NIV)

As to sharing in Jesus’ baptism, we believe that we are “baptized into his death and resurrection.” Baptism by immersion symbolizes this best: going under the water represents death, and emerging from the water represents resurrection and new life.

So, Jesus is asking James and John if they are ready to share in his suffering and death. Because that’s what it means to follow him. The only way to share in his glory, is to also share in his suffering.

With all the disciples present, Jesus explains, “whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”

One of the members of my church in Springfield, Missouri, recently passed away. Her name was Arlene, and she was a true servant. After her retirement, she

spent every day of the week volunteering. She logged thousands of hours at the local food bank in addition to a food pantry. In the cold winter months, she worked with a shelter for homeless women. She regularly collected recycling containers full of paper, plastic bottles, and aluminum cans from the church and loaded them in her car to take to the recycling center. Most of what she did was behind the scenes, and she was so quiet and small, she was nearly invisible. And she didn't do it to be great. She didn't want to call attention to herself. She did it to be a servant of God.

When we started the warming shelter for the homeless in the winter of 2018-19, one long-time church member who had not been in regular attendance for quite some time learned about our plans and called to volunteer. She said to me, "this might be what brings me back to church."

It's not just individual disciples that seek glory. It's churches, too. It's natural for us as a church to want to be known in the community for our beautiful building or our abundance of green space, our Peace Park or our fish and cross on the hill, our exceptional music or warm and welcoming people. And those things are important, to be sure.

But we are also called to serve. To be a vital participant in the community rather than isolated in our buildings. To follow Jesus means to visit and befriend and help those on the margins of society, whom others would rather ignore: the lepers, the beggars, the poor, the lonely, the suffering.

Though following Jesus involves some sacrifice and suffering, it's nothing like what he endured for us - for the whole world. Those who strive to be great eventually tumble off their pedestals into the mud.

May we all seek to serve, rather than to be served... to the glory of God!

AMEN.