October 17, 2021

Rev. Dr. Elizabeth Caldwell

Mark 10:35-45

**The Puzzle of Mark**

My sister and I like to work 1000-piece jigsaw puzzles together. One of us opens the box and the search begins for all the edge pieces. Rarely are we successful in finding them all so then we start filling in the middle, hoping that the hiding edge pieces will appear and we can begin. Sometimes I worry that the last edge piece might be lost but Cathy always reminds me, it’s here don’t worry. It will appear! And she’s right.

Last month when I was here, I had great fun helping out in the nursery with Isaac and his brother. Isaac likes to work puzzles that are maps of different countries. That day he brought with him a puzzle of the Middle East. We sat on the floor together so he could work on his puzzle, one that he had worked many times before. After dumping out all the pieces, he would pick up a piece and tell me what country it was and place it down. It was all I could do to keep myself from taking over and saying, “no, no it’s so much easier if you start with the edge pieces!” Thankfully I resisted and watched him work from the inside of the puzzle to finally adding the edges all around it. He got all the countries in place and then added the surrounding bodies of water that framed the map. Well, I was shocked and amazed! By the fact that he is three years old and he works puzzles from inside out!

Since the beginning of September Pastor Cathy has been working with stories from the Gospel of Mark. If you think of Mark like a jigsaw puzzle, then it would probably be only a 250-piece puzzle since it’s the shortest Gospel. There is a border on this puzzle but like the way Isaac works his puzzle, it’s better with Mark to start in the middle. So, we have these three pieces in place:

One shows the Syrophoenician woman asking Jesus for healing for her daughter and learning from him about the importance of “naming privilege” and the unsettling nature of justice work.

Another piece has a most interesting question on it - the one when Jesus looks at his disciples and asks - Who do you say that I am?

One piece asks the disciples’ question “Who is the greatest?

A picture of the scene of Jesus looking carefully with love at the rich man walking away is another piece in our Mark puzzle.

Today we add a piece of the continuing story of what Mark wants us to know about Jesus. In our text for today we meet the brothers James and John, or “Sons of Thunder as they are called by Jesus. They are bold and brash. We also hear about them in Luke 9:54 which tells about a time when they were traveling with Jesus through a Samaritan village. When the villagers refused to welcome them, offer them hospitality, James and John asked, “Lord, do you want us to call fire down from heaven to consume them?” (Luke 9:54). Luke writes, “But Jesus turned and spoke sternly to them, and they went on to another village. (Lk 9:55-56) As they say, there is history with these two disciples!

One commentary writer has said, the brother’s question of Jesus in the reading for today is probably the boldest and most entitled one that is recorded in the New Testament. “Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask.” And in that same manner of response by Jesus that is now familiar to us we hear his answer to the brothers.

And It is not one of these:

“Are you crazy?”

Have you lost your mind?

Do you know what you are asking?

Haven’t you been listening to anything I’ve said?

Or my favorite from our discussion on Tuesday – I’m not signing a blank check, what

do you want?

Some of those come to mind – but no, not Jesus – instead he responds with a question, “What do you want me to do for you?” Don’t you think he’s just a bit curious about what they want him to do. After all they have been traveling with him since leaving behind their father’s fishing business to join Jesus’ disciples. Think about all they have witnessed, seen, experienced. Can’t you just see Jesus’ brain at work, clicking through all the experiences they have shared, and wondering what in the world they could possibly want him to do.

“James and John, what is it you want me to do? “And they are ready with their answer. They have been paying attention. They have been listening to Jesus talk about the kin-dom. In the verses in this chapter preceding our reading for today, Jesus makes clear what is ahead as they move towards Jerusalem – his death! They thought they had been paying attention and getting it right and, in their mind, it was a fairly simple request: “Allow one of us to sit on your right and other on your left when you enter your glory.”

You have to like them for their honesty. They are so transparent in their request, aren’t they? “We want fame, we want the distinction of being the best, of being honored by sitting next to you. We want this privilege and prestige. “And it’s not just that they want it, they feel they deserve it. They are entitled.

Debie Thomas writes that James and John got three things right:

They trust Jesus, they have faith in him and they have committed their lives to following him.

They aren’t called “Sons of Thunder” for nothing. Thomas writes, “they are ambitious for the reign of God. They expect and *want* Jesus to be glorified; they expect and want the world’s wrongs to be righted. They’re not complacent about injustice, oppression, hatred, and violence; they actively long for Jesus’ kingdom to arrive in all its glory and remake the world.” (*Journey With Jesus)*

And they were right in coming to Jesus with their question, trusting their relationship with him, which shows they have been paying attention.

But they really missed something, something really big and this is evidenced in what they wanted from Jesus. Notice how Jesus responds with reminding them of what greatness really is – it’s not about power, it’s not about what you see in the government around you, it’s this,” Whoever wants to be first among you will be the slave of all. For the Human One didn’t come to be served but rather to serve and to give his life to liberate many people.” (*Common English Bible)* This should sound familiar to James and John since Jesus had just said this previously – “Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all” Jesus said in Mark 9:35.

Jesus reminds them yet again that the alternate community he envisions is one where being first is not the most important thing, being last is. Jesus invites them to reframe their understanding of power. When you share what you have, when you are able to be gently and lovingly present with another (like Jesus was last week with the young man) then you are on the way to understanding and embodying the kind of living he has been talking about.

The alternate community that Jesus envisions is the center piece of our puzzle. Each story we have been hearing these last two months in sermons is a piece that touches that one in the center. And there are a few more to be added in the coming weeks as we move closer to the end of this liturgical year and the beginning of Advent.

Last April in a sermon when Pastor Cathy wrestled with Psalm 23 and John 10, she invited us into the Psalm by asking us to imagine the Shepherd opening the Lamb and Wolf Café. She told us that the wolves showed up first and then the sheep “got curious and eventually, seeing a shepherd standing at the door, got up the courage to approach.” When the sheep asked for a table for two, they were surprised to learn that it wasn’t available, only one long communal table.

In your mind’s eye can you picture that café? I can! I’ve been thinking about it ever since my Pastor Cathy gave me that image. Here’s what I see:

As you enter just to the left are water bowls for the dogs who come with their humans. I see the coffee mugs on a rack on the wall. The Lamb and Wolf Café is committed to being eco-friendly, so no Styrofoam, only pottery. Coffee mugs abound, lots of Grace mugs, rainbow flag mugs and of course Jesus’ mug that says “Be careful whom you exclude, it is someone I love.” On the open shelves are soup bowls and Empty Bowls Cookbooks. Containers for delivering Meals on Wheels are on another shelf. An empty shelf starts to fill up as more people arrive for café conversation and a chance to drop off Emergency Food Bags. On another shelf are prayer shawls carefully knitted, crocheted and stitched. When you come in the Shepherd invites you to borrow one while you sit at the table for conversation and a cup of tea or coffee or water or take it home with you if you need comforting or if you want to share it with someone who does. And like in the Prayground here in the sanctuary, there is a book shelf where you’ll find a copy of each story Pastor Cathy has read for Children’s time, free to borrow by children of any age!

Then my eyes move to that long communal table in the center of the café where everyone is welcome to sit. There are jigsaw puzzles to work as you wait for your beverage or fresh bread and olive oil. Each puzzle tells a different story, stories about healings, conversations with Jesus, questions people asked Jesus, baptism, stories about meals shared at tables, beside lake, in fields.

The pieces that are in place in the puzzles on the table provide us with a glimpse of the kind of kin-dom that Jesus was inviting his disciples and all those he encountered to consider. But what about the edges. Oops, oh my look closely the edges haven’t been put in. They are blank. The crayons and markers are there. You fill in the edges. It’s up to you to put them in. How are you contributing to this alternate community to which Jesus invites us all? God’s Kin-dom is not complete without you and the gifts you bring!

“God welcomes all, strangers and friends. God’s love is strong and it never ends!”

Commentary citations are from the blog of Debie Thomas at *Journey with Jesus, A Weekly Magazine for the Global Church*, “What Glory Looks Like” posted 10/14/2018.