

Perhaps James and John have not been listening. Or could it be that they just “don’t get” what Jesus is telling them. Jesus has just finished telling the disciples that he is going to die at the hands of the rulers in Jerusalem, and then James and John come up with their toying request, *“Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask.”* When you get asked something like that, or even if someone just starts off by saying, “Will you do me a favor?” – the best reply is the reply that Jesus gave James and John: *“And just what is it that you want me to do for you?”*

James and John want to sit beside Jesus in his glory ... when he becomes King. They have in mind that Jesus is going to take Jerusalem by storm and set up his kingdom; they want to be front and center with him.

Jesus and his disciples are indeed headed towards Jerusalem. Verse 32 tells us: *“They were on their way up to Jerusalem, with Jesus leading the way, and the disciples were astonished, while those who followed were afraid.”* Everyone knows that the authorities are out to “get Jesus.” The disciples are astonished that Jesus is facing right into the troubled waters. Others are afraid; they seem to know what will happen. But James and John apparently blithely believe Jesus will be able to handle it and win the day. They are, after all, his loyal followers who believe in his cause to the nth degree.

Did you notice that Jesus does not rebuke them? Jesus does not get upset that they did not accept the dire forecast he just gave. Instead, Jesus tells them, *“You don’t know what you are asking. Can you drink the cup I drink or be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with?”* Can you undergo what I’m going to undergo? Will you stand beside me as I suffer and die?

Remember that old hymn [sing with me], *“Are ye able,”* said the Master, *“to be crucified with me?”* *“Yea, the sturdy dreamers answer, ‘to the death we follow thee!’ ‘Lord, we are able, our spirits are thine, remold them, make us, like thee, divine. Thy guiding radiance above us shall be a beacon to God, to love and loyalty.’”*

When Jesus asks James and John if they can really handle being by his side when he comes into his glory through the cross, they bravely say: “Yes, we can!” And Jesus prophesies: “*You shall indeed drink the cup I drink and be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with*”

And the Bible tells us that James was killed by the governing authorities later on – Acts 12:2-3 records that King Herod “*had James, the brother of John, put to death by the sword. When he saw that this pleased the [Jewish leaders], he proceeded to seize Peter also.*” That’s the beginning of the story of Peter’s miraculous escape from prison, recorded in Acts chapter 12. Peter escaped [that time], but James did not. James had to drink a cup very similar to the cup Jesus drank and was baptized into death at the hands of the violent powers of this world’s rulers.

We don’t know for sure about his brother John. We only have a “tradition” – which says that John faced martyrdom when he was boiled in a huge basin of boiling oil during a wave of persecution in Rome, but was miraculously delivered from death. John was then sentenced to the mines on the prison island of Patmos, where he wrote his prophetic book of Revelation. He was later freed and returned to what is now modern-day Turkey, and died as an old man – the only apostle to die peacefully. So John also drank the cup of persecution and was baptized into a way of life that many in this world battle against, even if he didn’t die at the hands of the violent rulers of the world, the way that James and Jesus died.

Jesus knew there will be a cup to drink; there will be an immersion into terrifying struggles for all who remain loyal to him. You shall indeed drink my cup and be baptized with my baptism, Jesus says. Nevertheless, “*to sit at my right or left is not for me to grant. These places belong to those for whom they have been prepared.*” And we know who ended up being at Jesus’ right and left side as he entered into his glory through the cross – two thieves – for whom the places beside Jesus were prepared.

Perhaps James and John still didn’t quite comprehend what all would be required of them. Perhaps Jesus turned their bravado into bravery. Or perhaps James and John actually wanted to let Jesus know that they would stand beside him through thick and thin. The other ten disciples didn’t understand them in that way. They “*became indignant with James and John*” (vs 41). How dare you try to vault yourselves above the rest of us! So Jesus seizes the teaching moment and tells

them (and us) – do not try to lord yourself over others. People on earth do that, but that is not the way it is to be among you. If you want to be great, become a servant. If you want to be at the forefront, become “*slave of all.*” Don’t expect to be served; instead serve others ... give your life for the sake of ransoming others.

This is not something new to us. It is a part of the New Testament that Brethren have focused on from the very beginning. Early Brethren modeled a life so totally loyal to Jesus that they were willing to suffer and give up everything for him. They were persecuted by governmental powers and had to flee from their homeland. We continue to practice giving up everything by stooping to wash one another’s feet, learning to care about other’s needs more than our own, taking the posture of a servant, doing the work that would have been the work of the house slave.

Philippians 2 teaches us to be willing to give up whatever power or prestige would normally be ours in order to take on the struggles and concerns of the people who need someone to help them. Philippians 2:4-8, “*Look to the interests of others. Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: who, being in very nature God did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death – even death on a cross!*”

I know Philippians 2 goes on to say that God thereafter exalted Jesus to the highest place, but that’s for God to do. What Jesus models for us, what Jesus tells us is *ours* to do, is to let go of any special status and become like a servant to care about the needs of the people around us. What servant ministry is God calling you to do?

This congregation has a strong history of making such ministries available – whether through Habitat for Humanity, Lebanon County Christian Ministries, Heifer Project, putting school kits or health kits together, working at disaster relief to care for people whose lives have been devastated by hurricanes, floods, tornadoes, or warfare ... there are all kinds of opportunities to give time and energy to be God’s servant in this world, helping to mend broken lives [article in LCCM newsletter]. *Today* you can help raise awareness of the needs to care for hungry people all around the world by walking in the CROP Walk. You can also work with COBYS to take care of children whose parents need training in order to become good parents, or of children who need foster care. You can volunteer at Lebanon Valley Brethren Home. You can

volunteer a year or two as a BVSer. I will never forget the children of the ghetto in Ludwigshafen where I worked for two years in Brethren Volunteer Service. Every summer there are work camps – for youth and young adults, but also for older adults and intergenerational weeks. Plus, we have our own work week, as a congregation, scheduled for May 9-16.

Those who have a “*slave of all*” spirit in them, pay attention when God opens their eyes to the needs of others. That is a part of our purpose as a church, we have said in our congregation’s purpose statement – we are partners in compassionate service – doing what Jesus would do, continuing the work of Jesus as we care for people around us.

Are *you* paying attention to the concerns and needs of the people whom the Lord is bringing into your life?

I read this week about Greg Mortenson, who served as a medic on mountain-climbing teams. In 1993, he was part of a team ascending the world’s second-highest mountain, called K2, located in the Himalayas, on the border between Pakistan and China. It is known as “The Savage Peak” because it is so difficult – for every four people who reach the summit, one dies trying to get there. Greg very nearly become one of the dead. After more than two months of struggling to reach the top, he had to turn back, only 600 meters away from the summit. A local guide was helping him off the mountain when they became separated, and Greg ended up in the primitive village of Korphe, Pakistan, where villagers cared for him because he was too sick to go on.

In this Muslim mountain village, Greg observed the harsh realities of Balti (the tribal name) life. 35% of the babies died because of diarrhea that is easily treated elsewhere. Medical care was almost nonexistent. And for the children who did survive, there was no school except for a teacher shared with a neighboring village.

Greg felt he had to do something. Here were people who had suddenly become a part of his life because of his misadventure. And he cared about them. So he came back to the States, raised money to buy supplies to build a school, fended off all the chieftains who would have shuttled the supplies to their own uses, and went through a variety of struggles to learn how to help people accept the help he wanted to offer ... perhaps you have read his story in a book called *Three Cups of Tea* – that title

refers to an old Balti proverb: *“The first time you share tea with a Balti, you are a stranger. The second time you take tea, you are an honored guest. The third time you share a cup of tea, you become family.”*

For Greg Mortenson it has become a long story – with many cups of tea ... a story of compassionate service that has resulted in more than 78 schools built over the past 16 years in rural and often volatile parts of Pakistan and Afghanistan, providing education to more than 28,000 children, including 18,000 girls.

Not everyone has welcomed his efforts. He has faced considerable dangers, including an 8-day armed kidnapping by a Taliban group. It eventually let him go after becoming convinced of his good intentions. Some even gave him money for the schools. Six years ago Mortenson escaped a fire fight between feuding Afghan warlords by hiding for eight hours under a load of putrid animal hides. He was the target of two fatwas from Islamic mullahs who didn't like his helping girls receive an education. He has received hate mail and even death threats from Americans because he is helping Muslim children receive an education. But by his dogged efforts, his selfless actions, and his willingness to meet people where they are without trying to impose on them some other agenda, Mortenson has gained the trust of the various people he must work with in both Pakistan and Afghanistan. What's more, many observers on both sides of the Atlantic believe that in the long run, it will be efforts such as his to build bridges instead of fight battles that will help reduce terrorism throughout the world. [source: *Homiletics* article for 10-18-09]

In what ways might *you* serve without seeking power or prestige, simply taking care of the needs of the people God places into your life?

Who needs special attention because they are ostracized or neglected?

Who needs you to become like a slave – giving up your comfortable calm in order to care for them despite the complications and struggle that compassionate service brings.

Drink the cup of Jesus; share his baptism; take the posture of his servanthood, and help someone discover the glory of his love.

Hymn 405 *Where Cross the Crowded Ways of Life*