

An Unexpected Conversation

Matthew 20: 20-28

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One of the trademarks of being a mom is wanting the best for your children. That was certainly the case with Mary Pinkney MacArthur. The wife of Arthur MacArthur, a career army officer who rose to the rank of general during the Civil War, she was determined that her son, Douglas, would follow in his father's footsteps. She even accompanied him to West Point, staying in a hotel not far from campus. After the First World War, in which her son served with distinction, she did not hesitate to write to the Army Chief of Staff, General John J Pershing, imploring him to give her son a "well-earned promotion." Evidently her letter did the trick, because Douglas rose in rank to become only one of five United States Army officers to receive the five star rank of General of the Army.

During His journey to Jerusalem another mother approached Jesus with similar aspirations. Her name was Salome and she was the proud mother of two sons named James and John. Like MacArthur's mom, she too had been traveling with her boys. She was, in fact, a member of the group of women who were traveling with Jesus. Having heard what Jesus said to the disciples about receiving places of honor in the coming Kingdom of heaven, she wanted to make sure that her two sons were not left out. She approached Jesus for what can best be described as "an unexpected conversation." This is what transpired.

Accompanied by her two sons, James and John, Salome knelt before Jesus, a sign of respect, and asked Him for a favor. In fact, it was more than a favor. It was "A Special Request." Jesus had made it clear to the entire company of fellow travelers that He was going to Jerusalem. As far as she was concerned, this could mean only one thing. Jesus was getting ready to establish His kingdom here on earth. She didn't know how that would happen and she put out of her mind any thoughts that He had said about being beaten and crucified. Those kind of things simply didn't happen to "God's Anointed." At long last the glorious days of King David's reign would be restored and she wanted her sons to be an important part of the new kingdom He would establish. So she asked, "Declare that these two sons of mine," perhaps nodding or looking up at each of them, "will sit, one at your right and one at your left, in your kingdom."

Unlike some Jewish teachers, Jesus was approachable, even with regards to women. He wanted to hear what they had to say and that's why He inquired

as to what Salome wanted. But He was surprised and even taken back for just a moment about such an unexpected request. Yes, Salome was an overprotective mom, why else would she be accompanying her two boys on this journey. Nevertheless, this was way over the top, a request made on an assumed assumption about what was going to happen in the future. And to be perfectly honest, her two sons may have put her up to it. In fact, in the Gospel of Mark, Salome is not mentioned. It's James and John who make the request. So looking them directly in the face, Jesus said, "You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I am about to drink?" Jesus was informing them of "A Harsh Reality" which they did not seem to understand. He had repeatedly told them and the other disciples about what was going to happen when they arrived in Jerusalem. But James and John along with all the others just didn't seem to get it. It was as if their ears were closed to the truth of what was about to happen. They eagerly replied, "Yes, we are willing and able to drink from this cup." They believed Jesus was offering them a cup of blessing and empowerment, not a cup of woe and suffering. In response, Jesus told them they would indeed drink from the same cup from which He would drink, but seats of authority to His left and right were not His to give. They were reserved for those whom His heavenly Father had chosen.

Well, you can image what happened when the other disciples heard about this conversation. They were livid. This was the kind of dispute that could quickly get out of hand. Jesus had to take charge of the situation and He did just that. He said, "Among the Gentiles, their rulers lord it over those beneath them. Sometimes they are even tyrants, demanding that everyone obey them. But not so among you. In God's kingdom, everything is just the opposite. Greatness is not for high and mighty. Greatness is for those who are willing to serve. Take me for example. I did not come to be served but to serve and to give up my life as ransom for many." Jesus had issued "A New Regiment," a new way of thinking, a new standard of behavior for those who wished to follow after Him. I'm pretty sure that neither the disciples nor the His other followers, like Salome, understood what He was saying. It would take a while, including Jesus' death and resurrection before they began to figure it out. The same may be also true for us. Much of what Jesus had to say is so different from our usual way of thinking and acting that we miss out on the meaning and implications of what Jesus both said and did. So let's see what this passage of Scripture has to say to us this morning.

To begin, there's that idea of "A Special Request." While it's true that we cannot speak to Jesus as Salome did, we do have another way of communicating with Jesus. It's called prayer. Jesus welcomes the opportunity to hear from us, just as He did for Salome. That's what was so special about Jesus. He listened to people, especially those who were on the lower echelons of life and those who were facing life threatening situations, like the father who brought his epileptic son to Jesus. He didn't turn His

back on them. He helped them and the same is true for us. So don't stop praying, don't stop making special requests, even the ones we repeat over and over again. Jesus said to keep on asking, to keep on praying (Luke 11:9). In that same passage of Scripture, Jesus told the parable about a man who woke up his neighbor asking for bread to feed an unexpected guest. It was late at night and the man's family was already in bed. Nevertheless, he got up and provided the bread because of that insistent knocking. Jesus was saying that surely our God is at least as willing to answer our prayers and meet our needs as a grumpy neighbor. I still remember the mother who came to me arm in arm with her son. He was attending church for the first time in many years. With a heartfelt smile she said, "My prayers have been answered." So keep on praying for your family, your sons and your daughters, and for all who need the Lord's help. Likewise continue to pray for our world and for those places where evil reigns, those places where God's rule and reign needs to be firmly established.

However, don't be surprised when some Harsh Realities emerge after those special requests are answered. Jesus told James and John that they would indeed drink from the same cup from which He would be drinking and that is exactly what took place. James was the first of Jesus' disciples to be martyred. Herod, an even more wicked grandson than Herod the Great, persecuted the church, putting James to death by the sword (Acts 12:1-2). John, his brother, was spared, and he lived to a ripe old age, writing the Gospel of John, the three epistles which bear his name, and the book of Revelation. But neither did he escape from the trials and tribulations of being a follower of Christ. While serving as the pastor of the church in Ephesus, he was arrested and exiled to the island of Patmos (Revelation 1:9). When Jesus told James and John that they would drink from the same cup from which He would drink, they probably imaged a life of ease, ruling and reigning with Jesus in an earthly kingdom. That's not what happened. Unfortunately, we can sometimes create the same kind of misunderstanding among God's people. They imagine a life of endless joy and happiness in Christ, free from all of the worries and hardships of life. They are anxious to hear that passage of Scripture in the Gospel of John where Jesus says, "I have come that you might have life and that you might have it more abundantly" (John 10:10). While it is true that true joy and happiness reside in our relationship with Jesus, that doesn't mean that life as a Christian is going to be a bed of roses. In my first church there was a young father who accepted Christ as his Lord and Savior. Soon thereafter his home nearly burned to the ground. It would have been easy for him to say, "See what happened. I became a Christian and my house burned down. Where was Jesus when that happened?" Fortunately those words never were spoken, because the father learned that his son had been playing with matches. Fortunately the little boy was able to escape before the flames enveloped him. The father realized that Jesus had indeed been watching over that little boy and his entire family.

Finally, as Christians we live in a world turned upside down. It's a New Regiment, a new way of relating to life. Jesus turned things upside down over and over again in terms of our relationships with one another and with God. To this very day those in authority like to lord it over those beneath them. Things haven't changed a great deal from the days of the Romans. But Jesus said that the kingdom of God did not operate in that way. Hear again what He said, "Whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant and whoever wishes to be first among you must be your slave." Did you catch those two words "servant" and "slave." A servant in Jesus' day was at the bottom of the employment scale. He received a small sum of money for a day's labor. A slave had it even worse. He was the property of his master. He received no wages at all. Jesus said that these are the folks who are greatest in the kingdom of heaven. In other words, when we take upon ourselves the role of a slave, someone who does something for someone else out of the goodness of their heart, asking nothing in repayment, that is greatness in the sight of God.

This kind of service is reminiscent of a photo I took years ago. I wish I still had it. In the photograph there are two women in their thirties dressed for battle. They have brooms and mops and plastic buckets filled with disinfectants and cleaning supplies. They are about to take on a dirty apartment, crawling with insects and roaches. Why? Because in that apartment a young mother with only a childlike understanding of life was living with a disabled baby. Our church had reached out to this mother. We realized that she and her daughter needed a helping hand and these two members of our church had volunteered to take on this day long challenge. That's what it means to be servant in the kingdom of God. When they step before their commanding officer in glory, I am confident that they will receive special recognition for service above and beyond the call of duty.

Jesus was on His way to Jerusalem. He knew what awaited Him. Even though He had been hailed as one who fed the hungry, healed the sick and preached to the multitudes, He knew that soon He would be reduced to the role of a servant and even a slave. Worse still he would be condemned as a criminal and suffer the humiliation of being nailed to a cross. In the world's eyes, that is not greatness, but Jesus knew that true greatness comes from another source, the voice of His heavenly Father saying, "Well done, thou good and faithful servant."