



# First United Church of Oak Park

## **Service Over Suffering**

Mark 10: 32-45

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It's easy to read this passage about James and John and think that they are just being upstarts. Here they are asking to sit at the right hand and left of Jesus in his glory. That is, they seem to be asking for great power and authority, for worldly positions that would allow them to lord it over everyone. In that case, Jesus would seem to be rebuking them to be servants — don't seek glory, but instead lowliness; don't seek power, but instead powerlessness.

But I think this passage in its greater context is not about that at all. It is instead a rejection of the idea that suffering is pleasing to God, and instead lays out a basis and foundation for Christian ethics. How are we to understand what is a good course of action or a bad one whether in matters great or small?

To begin at the beginning, then, Jesus is traveling to Jerusalem. And there he will face his own execution. And so he is discussing this, openly, with the Disciples. He tells them he is to be flogged and crucified and killed, and then rise again. This is the third time that Jesus spoke to his Disciples about this. The first time Jesus foretold his death, Peter took him aside and asked Jesus to reconsider. "No, this suffering is not for you," and Jesus replied — "get behind me, Satan." The second time Jesus foretold his death — no one said anything. Not surprising, who wants a "get behind me, Satan" from Jesus? But the third time, James and John come forward to say something.

Jesus predicts his death, and James and John say let us join you on your right hand and your left. Give us to drink the cup of suffering you will drink, give us to be baptized with the baptism of death you will be baptized with. Let us join you at your right and your left. There would be two who flanked Jesus on either side, but that was set aside for two bandits who at that very moment had no idea the way their deaths would intersect with Christ's.

Give us to sit at your right hand and your left, in your glory, James and John ask. They are offering to suffer. They are offering to give their lives. What will Jesus

say? It is a fraught moment, and much hangs on Jesus' words. Does God in fact want us to suffer? Does suffering in itself glorify God? As Christians, ought we be people who welcome suffering as a source of holiness in itself, a path to the right and left hand of glory? No. It is not.

Instead, Jesus offers a different path to glorifying God, a different path toward a holy life — to serve others. Serving others, Jesus says, this is the path Christians ought to tread. Not suffering for its own sake, but serving those who are suffering, and alleviating their pains. Human suffering does not glorify God; humbly serving others and alleviating their suffering — this is how to glorify the God who knows what it is to suffer.

“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 ransom for many.”

Suffering will come in life — this we know all too well. But suffering is not pleasing to God. And God does not ask us to court suffering in order to become holy. In our lives today, in a world that is indeed awash in suffering, Jesus' simple response to James and John affords us a full methodology for assessing ethical action from a Christian point of view. And it is as plain and wholesome as can be. If I am considering a course of action, I must ask myself, will this action alleviate suffering for others? By taking action, will I add to others' burdens or lighten them? Thinking especially of those whose suffering is the most acute, can my actions bring a bit more light into their world? Can I be a servant to the least of these? Whether in actions great or small, this is the Christian ethic Christ calls us to.

As a whole church, we seek this stance of service. We give away almost \$100,000 a year to organizations doing good work in the world, easing suffering and serving those in need. The congregation's money is of course important, but so, too, is our building. We use our building too for this. Thousands of families suffering under poverty and want come to this church every year to the food pantry. Alleviating hunger, easing fear of how to feed their families, we put our building to use in service of those who are suffering. The House to Home collection, currently making the chapel balcony look like a big brown hen just stuffed to its tail feathers — this will be a welcome gift for those who are leaving homelessness. A new home is a place to rest and heal, a balm for the spirit of those who suffered terribly from homelessness. We put our people power to work in this, too, with volunteers from our membership making all of this possible — I

dare not even start listing individuals, because if I do I will either go on for an hour or leave the deserving unnamed.

In this place, the love of God is shown, and God is glorified. As a whole church we ought to place service to the suffering as the path to glorifying God, alleviating suffering as the path toward a holy life. Suffering will come in this world, and the people of God ought joyfully to rise to the work of healing it.

May God strengthen us for that good work.