

Mark 10:32-45

They were on the road, going up to Jerusalem, and Jesus was walking ahead of them; they were amazed, and those who followed were afraid. He took the twelve aside again and began to tell them what was to happen to him, saying, "See, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be handed over to the chief priests and the scribes, and they will condemn him to death; then they will hand him over to the Gentiles; they will mock him, and spit upon him, and flog him, and kill him; and after three days he will rise again." James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came forward to him and said to him, "Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you." And he said to them, "What is it you want me to do for you?" And they said to him, "Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory." But Jesus said to them, "You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?" They replied, "We are able." Then Jesus said to them, "The cup that I drink you will drink; and with the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized; but to sit at my right hand or at my left is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared." When the ten heard this, they began to be angry with James and John. So Jesus called them and said to them, "You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. But it is not so among you; but 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 a ransom for many." (*also Job 38:1-18*)

"Words Without Knowledge"

I want to start with a question for you. What do you believe it means to follow Jesus? No really, what does it mean to you to be a follower, of Jesus? There are many answers so don't be shy! (The congregation voiced answers)

So what does it mean to follow Jesus? Though our answers are all part of a larger truth, the part of his message that speaks to us most deeply varies with who you ask.

In our first reading God answers Job, a man that appeared righteous to his contemporaries because of his fortune and his faith. Can he claim his faith through suffering too? After 37 chapters of Job's struggle of knowing himself as righteous and afflicted, God answers, "Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge?"

What is this knowledge Job lacked? It's a full experience of God. He and his friends have lots of things to say about faith, righteousness, and God—but God desires a relationship, our experience of knowing God with us at all times. Acquired facts and theories about God are not a relationship. We need to experience God's grace. In God's reply, Job experienced God as Creator and learned that God set the limits of chaos. God was with him even in his suffering. Job even found his place in relation to God as God spoke through a wild storm! You can't transfer such an experience of God to another. Each must come into relation with God through their own experiences.

While on vacation recently I worshipped at two vastly different churches. In the first the minister told me exactly how the scriptures were to be interpreted and that his interpretations were Bible truth, period. At the other church the minister invited me into a deeper relationship with God by encouraging practices of faith relating to the texts she preached on. Both ministers knew the scriptures inside and out, yet their interpretations and the way in which they shared the message were separated by a chasm!

At the first church, a large non-denomination one in south of Los Angeles, I was taught that there was a right way, and many wrong ways, to study and interpret the Bible.

Thank goodness that this church taught *THE RIGHT WAY*. My experience in worship with this church continues to pain and trouble me. I expected a conservative evangelical message. Unfortunately I did not hear one! Instead I heard a lot of bad news. Bad news for John the Baptist—whose words were being interpreted and taught that night. For that matter, bad news for all the Jews. Bad news for women ministers. Bad news for those who are not heterosexual. Bad news for biblical scholars, theologians and others in the academy. Bad news even for the poor and the least of these who I learned Christians should “consider” but do not serve. If they really believed they wouldn’t be in the situations they were in you see. I don’t know what happened to Jesus’ teaching that whoever wishes to become great must be a servant to all. The only service to anyone outside this church was proselytizing “sinners”.

Then, I listened in disbelief as the minister sought and got laughs out of his congregants by demeaning others. He chuckled as he related, “I’m glad I was out of town awhile back when some protestors held a silent protest across the street from the church Sunday morning.” They were protesting the church’s distribution of condemning tracts and signs constantly distributed in their neighborhood. If the minister had been in town, he said, he wouldn’t have been able to be as nice to them as the minister who handled it! Better that someone else “dealt” with them that day. Then he went on to compare the protestors to the demons who cried out to Jesus, “Leave us alone.” “They don’t want the truth.” he said.

At that point my heart finished its downward descent to the floor beneath me. All the people around me had their Bibles open, and their pencils were rapidly jotting notes on the “biblical truths” that were being taught. I was angry. I felt hate start to creep into my like an infestation from all the bad news. So I prayed for peace to wash over me, and for it to replace my intense dislike of the minister’s teachings and the loathing forming within me. Prayer helped me to not be sucked into hate that evening.

The congregation clung to the minister’s words in a way I hope you *never* cling to mine. If you leave every week without pondering, adding to, or disagreeing with something about my interpretation of scripture—then we’ve got our journey together wrong. God wants you in the experience, in the dialogue, acquiring knowledge through your own experience with God. Rote memorization of one minister’s interpretation of scripture does not equal knowledge of God! Those are just words recited—words without knowledge. When worship ended the folks I was with did not introduce me to any of their friends as a Presbyterian minister. We had just walked past the 12 male pastors. Their actions told me my call was not a minority opinion within the bounds of biblical witness to them. I was a shameful anomaly to keep concealed!

I get a little nervous every time I read how off the mark the disciples are from comprehending and following Jesus’ teachings! If they, who were so close to Jesus, don’t get the basics of his teachings—what about me? Are we any closer to following Jesus’ teachings than James and John who asked to sit in glory on each side of Jesus though he had just proclaimed he was to be handed over, mocked, spit upon, flogged and killed in a few days? They didn’t understand their need for servanthood or suffering, and latched onto the glimpses of glory Jesus showed forth. Since his resurrection, we are even more tempted than early disciples to bypass our own experience of God in favor of glorifying written words literally understood as relational truth. Yet Jesus warned his disciples against lording over others as earthly rulers do.

Thank goodness I found myself to be a welcome minority in another congregation the second week of my vacation. I was in San Francisco visiting a friend from Seminary. We went to a Metropolitan Community Church, which is a denomination that moves in the mainstream of Christianity and offers a home to all who confess and believe in one triune God. It's an inclusive community of faith. From the moment we walked in we were welcomed simply as Christians. The pastor preached an excellent gospel sermon and she even walked us through a practice of prayer that focused our minds on forgiveness, peace and reconciliation. She stressed our need to follow Jesus' teachings in order to experience new life through the living Word. To gain knowledge about God we'd have to learn to give over to God our extra baggage of the hate, fear, and violence that comes from within us and also the wounds others have inflicted upon us. She invited us to be servants of the crucified one, to learn greatness through serving God and others as Jesus did.

We are a people tempted to say words about God without knowledge of God and call those words faith. Some Christians base their whole lives on what they suppose to be a literal interpretation of the scriptures. Yet knowledge of God is acquired not only through reading, interpreting and loving the scriptures, but also through practicing faith and opening ourselves to God's transformative power.

It is true that like the disciples, we do not always know what we are asking. Our interpretations are often wrong. That's why we rely on the grace provided by the one who gave his life for many. Faith leads us to challenge suffering as Job did and to challenge systems of injustice as Jesus did. How are we to be leaders and followers of Jesus? Not by domination or force but instead by being a servant to others. The sacrificial will to serve characterizes God's love. May we follow Jesus' example and be transformed to new lives of understanding God's greatness through service to all. Amen.