

Twenty-first Sunday after Pentecost, Year B  
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St. Mark's Episcopal Church | Milwaukee, WI  
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*Hebrews 5:1-10*  
*Mark 10:35-45*

“We are able” the apostles James and John said confidently to Jesus, when Jesus asked them “Are you able to drink the cup that I drink?” that is: be committed to fully follow Him. “We are able” they said.

Recently, I was asked to lead a nature hike for some sophisticated people at a well-known nature center. I quickly agreed, and began a bit of planning – but not much as I am an expert leader of hikes in the woods of Wisconsin. After all, I have all the credentials and experience to do so. *Or so I thought.* The day came for me to lead the hike, and it was a nice group. We began happily going from spot to spot, with me providing interpretations of the plants and ecosystem features at each. Then the questions began, and one was very challenging. I quickly answered the ones I could, and then answered the one I couldn't as I usually do by saying: “Good questions. I don't know. Something for us all to look up, eh?” But, then unlike my usual hikes, more and more questions I couldn't answer were fired at me...and that response didn't work anymore. I was stumped. I felt like I had just fallen into a deep pothole and got splattered with mud. I was humbled to say the least. The experience began with my saying to myself “I am able” and ended with me saying, “Oh my, I clearly wasn't able.”

Maybe you too have had life moments like this, as I had and as the apostles experienced in today's Gospel. Oh, you thought you were ready, fully informed and committed for an important commitment, and so when asked you said unequivocally “yes, I'm able to do this.” And then...you discovered as you got into it how naïve and overly confident you were in your assumptions of what you needed to know or do to fulfill the commitment. Maybe your experience was one at work when you gladly accepted an assignment that was over your head. Maybe it was something involving volunteer work or social engagements, and you realized in the midst of the experience you weren't ready. Life moments like these make us examine our motive for saying “yes, I am able.” Like the apostles, maybe our motives are mixed – some honorable, and some not so honorable; some full of caring and some wanting credit or to get ahead. Obviously, the example I gave is trivial compared to what was going on in today's Gospel. Let's delve into that more.

The apostles were following Jesus along the road, and they thought they knew their destination, where they were heading – but clearly, they did not! Jesus was taking them on a journey toward greater faith, but as we see in the Gospel stories they fell into many potholes along the journey. The pothole they unexpectedly fell into here had to do with their self-absorption and ambition. James and John asked to sit at Jesus' right and left hands in heaven. Here is where they were coming from: They think they already understand and embrace everything Jesus is and has taught, and that because they were in the inner circle they were more privileged than others. They wanted to make sure they got the corner offices in the new Jesus office building. So Jesus,

knowing they have no clue about what they are saying, replies, “You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink?” In other words, “do you believe you are prepared to accompany me in the suffering and persecution that I must undergo in order to fulfill my mission?” “The cup” was the death Jesus was to endure on the cross. This road trip they were on was to Jerusalem, where Jesus was headed to fulfill His mission: the crucifixion and resurrection. Right before this passage in Mark’s Gospel, Jesus told all of this to His apostles! But they didn’t yet get it....and, of course, this is understandable. It is difficult to comprehend.

The good news is that all of this is not about what we know or have done or accomplished but about what Jesus has done and accomplished. As our Epistle reading from Hebrews today said, Jesus “became the source of eternal salvation.” As the Gospel said, “The Son of man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” Jesus went through suffering and death for us, rose from the dead, and offers us abundant life. Jesus stands before you as your savior and servant. Jesus meets you where you are, in the midst of your suffering, your confusion, your frustrations - and gives you the free gift of grace and love.

We celebrated St. Francis of Assisi’s feast day last week, and so often we think only of blessing of the animals when we think of St. Francis. It is wonderful to bless our animals, but there is so much more to Francis than this! St. Francis’ own story parallels our Gospel story today of James and John. You see, Francis was raised with a silver spoon in his mouth: as a young man he was an arrogant rich party boy. Then, he went through some difficult life experiences: injury, imprisonment, loneliness. He prayed in earnest. His life was changed, his motives changed. As a result of his hearing God, Francis began living a God-focused life, began serving others instead of living for himself. He realized that he “was able” all because of God’s love and generosity, and not through his own power or abilities. So, from then on he sought to bring union where there was discord, bring light where there was darkness, to bring joy where there was sadness. He sought to console others, to love others, to be generous and forgiving—and was able to do all of this through God’s help. Francis, like the apostles before him, were transformed by Jesus.

We are in the process of being transformed by Jesus too. Learn from Jesus when you fall into a pothole, and let God refocus your life. As we are transformed, week after week through prayer and the sacraments and study and love from others -- we overflow with gratitude. Serving, sharing God’s love with others, this happens naturally-- it is a byproduct of that gratitude. By the grace of God, yes, you are able to accept God’s perfect love and share it. You are able to bring light where there is darkness, bring joy where there is sadness, bring union where there is discord.

Let us pray together the prayer #69 on page 835 in the Book of Common Prayer, which speaks to today's message: "O God our King, by the resurrection of your Son Jesus Christ on the first day of the week, you conquered sin, put death to flight, and gave us the hope of everlasting life: Redeem all our days by this victory; forgive our sins, banish our fears, make us bold to praise you and to do your will; and steel us to wait for the consummation of your kingdom on the last great Day; through the same Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen."