

Not Quite Getting It (Mark 11:1-11)

William Goldman's classic 1973 novel, *The Princess Bride*, sees a young farm boy, Westley, who, after leaving to seek his fortune, is finally presumed dead when he fails to return home. Westley's love, Buttercup, heartbroken that he's gone, reluctantly agrees to marry Prince Humperdinck, not knowing that Westley is alive and on a quest to rescue her.

In Rob Reiner's 1987 film adaptation of the book, Westley, portrayed by Cary Elwes, is accompanied by three other travelers. Inigo Montoya, played by Mandy Patinkin; Fezzik, the gentle giant who loves rhymes, is portrayed by Andre the Giant; and Vizzini, the arrogant know-it-all, is played by Wallace Shawn.

Their journey is fraught with dangerous confrontations, such as outsmarting a cunning Sicilian criminal, facing off against colossal beasts, and navigating the treacherous Fire Swamp. Good stuff.

It also had some famous lines. If you've read the book or seen the movie ... heck, if you've been conscious for a bit in our culture, you've almost certainly run across one line in particular. But Mandy Patinkin's line, which he continually repeats in the movie, has vaulted to the status of cultural icon: "My name is Inigo Montoya. You killed my father. Prepare to die."

Another, almost as popular line comes from Wallace Shawn's character, Vizzini, the arrogant know-it-all—who, every time a plan of his is thwarted, says, "Inconceivable!" Finally, apparently, Inigo Montoya gets fed up with the irony that every time something happens to foil one of Vizzini's master plans, the results are **entirely** conceivable. After enough, Inigo Montoya says, "You keep that word. I do not think it means what you think it means."

Did you ever do that—say something and have people say, "I don't think that means what you think it means." We used to have a President who had a special knack for the malapropism.

He was given to serious pronouncements that boomeranged: "We cannot let terrorists and rogue nations hold this nation hostile or hold our allies hostile." He explained to Bob Woodward, "I'm the commander — see, I don't need to explain — I do not need to explain why I say things. That's the interesting thing about being president."

The wrong word or a bad definition of the ***right*** word can cause problems. As Mark Twain once famously said, "The difference between the right word and the almost-right word is the difference between lightning and the lightning bug." Words matter.

Palm Sunday, interestingly, is predicated on a word. I'll bet you didn't know that. Palm Sunday—and the rest of Holy Week—turns on one little word.

Think about what's been happening as Jesus finalizes his travel itinerary to Jerusalem. Go back a ways. It might help if you have

your Bibles out for this. Back in chapter nine, Jesus foretells his death to his disciples by saying, “The Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him, and three days after being killed, he will rise again” (31).

Mark adds a telling explanatory note: “But they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask” (9:32). Next, Mark tells us about an argument among the disciples about who will be the greatest, to which Jesus says, “The program I’m launching is different. If you want to play on **my** team, you need to understand that the first will be last and the last will be first” (9: 35).

After leaving that place, Mark tells us that they go to Judea, where people start bringing little children to see Jesus. The disciples, you’ll recall, touch their earpieces, speak into their wrist microphones, and bar the way. Jesus overrides their security precautions and tells everyone that not only are the children welcome.

Why?

They're the kind of folks he's looking for to fill out his cabinet because "it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs" (10:14).

Next, a rich man who thinks he's got Jesus all figured out, confronts him and asks with a rather smug look on his face, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" (10:17). When Jesus tells him to sell all he owns and give the money to the poor, everybody looks discouraged and starts wondering, "Then who can be saved?" At which point, Jesus again throws out his now famous line about "the first being last, and the last being first" (10:31).

The very next verse has Jesus and the disciples heading toward Jerusalem, where he once again predicts his death in amazingly explicit terms—"they will mock him, and spit upon him, and flog him, and kill him; and after three days he will rise again" (10:34).

Apparently missing the significance of what Jesus has just said about being “like little children,” about being last, being humiliated, and being dead, James and John elbow their way to the front of the line and blurt out, “Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you” (10:35). When Jesus asks what exactly they want, they say, “Well to be boss, of course ... or at least underbosses. You know, one on your right hand and one on your left hand—when you come into your glory.”

You know, the glory ... the red carpet, limo, and paparazzi that Jesus has been painstakingly describing to them—the being-turned-over-and-being-killed glory to which every ambitious, right-minded, would-be ruler aspires. And, of course, the other ten disciples, completely missing the subtle irony of James and John’s request, try to horn their way into cabinet-level positions themselves.

With mounting frustration, Jesus says, “If you had any idea what this new world I’ve been talking about is, you wouldn’t ask such

stupid questions—because anyone who wants to be great in this new world must first be a servant. ‘For the Son of Man came not to **be** served, but to **serve**, and to give his life a ransom for the many’” (10:45).

Do you, by any chance, see a pattern developing here?

Jesus finds himself hounded by an army, not of the “young and the restless” but of the thick and the dim. Everyone following him to Jerusalem seems almost **intentionally** dull. Inveterate point-missers. Jesus continues to say one thing, and they continue to hear something entirely different—without exception.

Well, that’s not entirely true; there is one exception just prior to our text for today. On the road to Jerusalem, Jesus and his disciples stop in at Jericho, where they come upon a blind man named Bartimaeus, who, when he hears it’s Jesus, yells out, “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!” (10:47).

You can almost feel Jesus perk up. Marks says, “Jesus stood still,” which sounds like a throw-away line until you stop to realize that Jesus hasn’t done much “stopping to realize” in quite a while. He’s been constantly on the move—heading to his date with destiny or, less grandly, perhaps, trying to shake the perpetually misguided, who keep “misunderestimating” him.

But finally, **someone** catches on. He’s been walking for what seems like forever, and somebody **finally** gets it, somebody **finally** sees him for who he is—and it stops him dead in his tracks.

And what is the Markan irony here?

The only one on the road to Jerusalem who seems to see Jesus for who he truly is ... is a man who literally cannot see.

So, by the time we get to Jerusalem, we're hoping that Jesus' message about who he is is getting a little traction. But alas, we're in for more disappointment.

All along this journey to Jerusalem, everyone (except the sightless guy) is missing Jesus' point right and left. They keep tripping over a tiny little word. They think they know what the word means, but at every turn, Jesus keeps saying, "I do not think that word means what you think it means."

What word is that? What word is it that has got these folks—many of whom have followed Jesus for a couple of years now—so flummoxed? Any guesses?

Messiah.

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Everybody grew up knowing what Messiah meant. A messiah was God's enforcer. You know, the leg-breakers anointed by God to rise up and throw off the shackles of oppression. Someone in the mold of King David, someone capable of rallying the troops and reestablishing Judean pride.

Someone like Cyrus, who overthrew the Babylonians and restored Judah to its homeland, and paid for the temple to be rebuilt.

Someone like Mattathias Maccabees, who rose up and overthrew Antiochus IV and the Greeks with a ragged band of freedom fighters, engineering guerrilla raids from the Judean outback. The Maccabees were less than two hundred years before Jesus, and that victory—one of the sweetest in the history of God's people—was still fresh on everybody's mind.

Indeed, there were any number of "messiahs" or "Christs," which the word messiah translated into Greek. Judas the Galilean was thought to be a messiah whose rebellion was put down in 6

BCE—at almost the same time as Jesus was born. He was captured by Rome and killed. Reza Aslan points out that “as retribution for the city's having given up its arms to Judas's followers, the Romans marched to Sepphoris and burned it to the ground. The men were slaughtered, the women and children auctioned off as slaves. More than two thousand rebels and sympathizers were crucified en masse. A short time later, Herod Antipas arrived and immediately set to work transforming the flattened ruins of Sepphoris into an extravagant royal city fit for a king.”

Sepphoris, interestingly enough, was only about 2.5 miles from Nazareth. So, Jesus' hometown, the place he grew up, was in the suburbs of a city that was burned to the ground after having been the home base of another messiah and his followers, who were crucified for a failed revolution. All of this happened approximately the year Jesus was born.

So, when Jesus arrived on the scene, Palestine was desperate for another messiah, a hero, someone to rally the oppressed locals to finally kick the Roman interlopers out of Palestine. They needed, in short, a messiah acquainted with the business end of a sword.

I suspect you can imagine that when Jesus starts talking about humiliation and death as **his** vision of messiahship, how it is that so many people completely fail to hear him. They didn't quite get it.

By the time Jesus gets to Jerusalem, folks are starting to get that old messianic feeling again. Those who are of a mind, start getting whipped into a frenzy. "We can do this! This is our time! Jesus could call everyone together. We could make this happen!"

You can see why back in chapter 8, when Jesus asked his disciples who people said he was, and Peter answered, "The Messiah," how it might be that when Jesus redefined Messiah as

the **receiver** of violence rather than as its **perpetrator**, why Peter rebuked Jesus.

You can see why James and John had been thinking about their new positions on the other side of the insurrection. Secretary of State? Secretary of Defense? Something good, right?

People seemed to be getting the same sense that something big—politically, militarily—was about to happen.

They gather out in the streets as Jesus makes his way into Jerusalem, laying down branches in the road and shouting, "Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David!" The time is ripe for revolution.

Jesus even makes his way to the temple. Perfect. The temple is the perfect place to incite a revolution! Politically. Economically. Symbolically. It's pitch-perfect for a revolution.

But what does he do when he gets there, the crowd ready to take to the streets at his command?

Does he pick up the megaphone?

Does he launch into the stirring martial oratory necessary for rallying the strong to war, or at least for fortifying the weak spirits of the unconvinced?

What happens when he gets to the temple?

In perhaps the most telling verse of the whole passage, Mark says that Jesus went into the temple, “and when he had looked around at everything, as it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the twelve” (11:11).

Huh?

Jesus goes to the temple to start a revolution. Only the revolution Jesus starts doesn't sound revolutionary at all. It sounds excruciatingly anti-climactic, at best—and suicidal, at worst. He's going to overthrow the occupying powers, using a donkey for a war horse? He's got no army. He's got no generals. He's got no swords. How does he expect to win a war that way?

But when Jesus returns the following morning, he starts overturning the tables of the money changers, and it looks like the revolution is back on!

It strikes me that 2000 years later, we're still asking those same questions. How can he win a war without an army? How can he overthrow the powers and principalities without violence? How does he expect to lead this rag-tag group of disciples to victory?

We can't stand against the forces arrayed against us. We need a messiah people will respect, a muscular, successful messiah who'll command the respect of all those scoffers.

Jesus says, "You have no idea what you're asking. You've got the whole glory thing mixed up. People who know what 'messiah' really means aren't concerned with who gets to be first or who gets to be greatest. I have an entirely different way of measuring success from the one you're used to. You've misunderstood. I do my best work—not with the first, the greatest, the together, or the successful—but with the last, the least, the lost, and the dead. **They're** the only ones not laboring under the illusion that they could've done it themselves given enough time and resources. Resurrection requires death—not competence."

Messiah. I keep saying to myself, "I do not think that word means what you think it means."

In the new world God is unveiling, the weapon of choice for a messiah is a corpse.

It turns out that not quite getting it is what saves us.

—Amen.