

A Taste of True Glory (Mark 10:35-45)

I don't know about you, but I've worked some really lousy jobs in my life. Remember that show that used to be on, *Dirty Jobs with Mike Rowe*? The premise of the show was that Mike Rowe would travel around to do some of the dirtiest jobs in the world. I watched a few, and although I didn't see any of my previous places of employment, I'm pretty sure at least one or two of the businesses where I've punched a clock ***must*** have been featured at some point.

I've rustproofed cars, spraying this sticky black tar-like stuff onto the underside of cars—and as part of that job, I'd periodically have to get down in the drainage trough hip-deep and scoop out all the nasty rustproofing material and other chemical runoff so the owner didn't get fined for letting it drain into the sewers. Yeah, that was fun.

I've worked as a telemarketer, a hospital caterer, and a press operator stamping out clutch plates for car parts manufacturers who supply the Big Three in Detroit. I worked for one summer making retainers and other dental devices. I've worked at a bread factory, a flooring manufacturer, and a medical device plant. I've delivered pizzas for Domino's and wore a powder-blue polyester double-knit uniform when I worked at McDonalds. I've been an assistant manager at Speedway, a seasonal delivery helper at UPS, and a framer for a building contractor. I managed a youth basketball league, worked as a janitor, assembled fishing lures, and sold Cutco knives.

One of my favorite commercials of all time aired about ten years ago. It was for the jobs site, Monster.com.

If you saw it, you probably remember it. It's shot in black and white, and features a parade of fatalistic looking kids from about seven to eleven years-old, looking into a camera and talking about their future plans:

"When I grow up, I want to file all day."

"I want to claw my way up to middle management."

"Be replaced on a whim."

"I want to have a brown nose."

"I wanna be a 'yes' man."

"Yes woman."

"Yes, sir. Coming sir. Anything for a raise, sir."

"When I grow up, I want to be under-appreciated."

A little girl says, "I want to be paid less for doing the same job."

Another little girl says, “I want sunshine blown up my dress.”

The screen goes black, and the words “What did you want to be?” pop up.

Now, the point I’m trying to make isn’t that doing dirty jobs is beneath our dignity, or that it’s something that talented people shouldn’t ever be saddled with doing. If Buddhism teaches us anything, it’s that there’s meaning to be found in the simplest and least glamorous of tasks.

No, the point is that—though we should never consider any work beneath us—we have to be honest (just as a matter of simple social observation) about the fact that almost no one grows up wanting to rust proof cars or a climb the vocational ladder to “telemarketer.”

Turns out, children don’t actually aspire to the prospect of spending their lives clawing their way up to middle management.

We live in a culture that values money, power, and beauty. If you want to get ahead in this world, our culture is quick to let you know just who you need to be, what kind of job you need, how much money you should have in your bank account, and when you get the right amount of all of it, just what kind of makeup or facial you need to possess to be able to keep it.

We know what occupying the top rungs of the socio-economic ladder looks like, don't we?

We know what kinds of cars you're supposed to drive, what kinds of watches you ought to wear, what kind of double-oaked cask-strength bourbon you should keep in your liquor cabinet, where you're supposed to vacation.

We know what you're supposed to look like, how smooth your skin's supposed to be, and how good your breath should smell.

Disney's taught us how little girls are supposed to look. And Marvel has taught us how little boys are supposed to **want** to look.

We've gotten the message. We know what being a winner looks like.

Large and in charge. According to our culture, a meaningful life must include not just excellences, but excellences that everybody recognizes as worth possessing. Outside the State Fair, for example, being the best pickle canner isn't going to bring you the kind of acclaim our culture believes is worth pursuing. Though that might once have been a way to earn social capital, it is most decidedly not one now.

No. We **know** what prestige looks like.

Apparently, James and John have gotten the memo, too. They've bought the age-old belief about what it means to get ahead in

life. So, they come to Jesus and they ask if, you know—when he comes into his glory—they can have seats on the 50 yard-line.

Of course, there's a flaw in their plan, isn't there?

Unfortunately for them, it's not immediately apparent from where they stand. In fact, they might be forgiven for not understanding their error at all, cutting against the grain as it does.

I mean, they're not entirely dim. They know enough to know that this Jesus is going places. They've heard the rumblings about "Messiah" at the edges of people's conversations. They know the Jesus supertrain is about to leave the station; the problem is that they believe it's going in a completely different direction from where Jesus seems to be heading—which, as we pointed out last week, is on the way to Jerusalem and a particularly gruesome reckoning with an executioner—someone who has his own dirty job, but who operates with a federal pension.

James and John think they know, but they show by their question that they don't have a clue.

Our Gospel this morning comes right after what is regularly called the "third passion prediction"—which is to say, the third of those passages that talk about Jesus' immanent betrayal into the hands of his enemies.

Three times in Mark Jesus says he's going to die and be raised again. Three times the disciples demonstrate that they don't get what he's talking about.

Today's text is the third time the disciples demonstrate that they don't understand what's at the heart of Jesus' ministry.

But, as Rolf Jacobson suggests, perhaps "passion prediction" isn't the best way to understand what Jesus does in telling about his impending death. Jacobson argues that we would do better to understand these occasions as "Interpretations of Messianic

Identity” or “Announcements of Messianic Mission,” since to talk about them as a prediction is to imply that the most important issue is whether or not they came true—which isn’t really the most interesting question.

The most interesting question is what does being a messiah—when Jesus does it—**look** like?

Because what the disciples demonstrate they don’t understand about Jesus’ mission has less to do with whether or not it will come true, but what it might mean if it does come true.

What do I mean?

Simply this: the disciples ask to have important positions alongside the new messiah, to be included in all the grand happenings after Jesus comes into his glory. They assume they know exactly what that glory will look like. That they don’t grasp Jesus is going to be killed as a common criminal demonstrates

that they don't really comprehend what kind of glory Jesus is going to come into—a kind of “glory” to which nobody aspires.

Mark shows us that the disciples are laboring under the common misperception that still plagues popular understandings of the meaning of life—that in order for a life to be consequential, for it to achieve the kind of prestige we tend to think defines meaningful lives, there must be power and success. There must be fame and beauty and money. There must be appropriate seats at the right and left hand of the seat of power.

The expectation is that the Messiah's glory will look like a life worth slapping up on a billboard, worth singing heroic ballads about, worth holding up as an example to all ambitious young people whose motivation in life it is to conquer the world.

You see, that's the kind of thing “Messiah” had always meant. Messianic glory was political/military glory—the kind won at the

end of a sword, and then maintained with ruthlessness when necessary.

To be sure, the kind of messianic glory Jesus announces comes at the end of a sword ... unfortunately, it's at the **wrong** end of the sword—the sharp, pointy end, dripping with blood and defeat.

But we're not so different today. The way the world is currently situated, people tend to think recognition and success come from some amazing aptitude or from an especially vigilant attention to detail.

Beautiful, intelligent, successful. That's the message. And it's a hard one not to buy.

Heck, even the church often buys that message. Even congregations know what true glory looks like, don't they? Big, important, swarming with new people—in particular, those folks

between the ages of 25-49, with children and business cards that describe professional jobs.

Small, irrelevant, marginal. These we can ignore. Who needs failure anyway?

Unfortunately, Jesus isn't singing from the same hymn book as the rest of us. (I wish he'd get with the program.) Always flying in the face of conventional wisdom, Jesus redefines success downward.

Small, irrelevant, marginal? That's precisely the kind of raw material Jesus seeks out to establish this new reign of God. "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."

Not helpful. Popular Christianity promises a Jesus who wants to be your pal, a Jesus who doesn't want you to be inconvenienced, a Jesus who's real concern is that all your biases are continually reconfirmed for you. A Jesus who knows what true glory looks like. And, let me tell you, if that were what this whole Jesus-thing was about, that would be a whole lot easier on me.

But unfortunately, I'm not good enough at this to give you **that** Jesus. Instead, I'm so incompetent at my job that all I can manage to figure out how to give you is a Jesus who seeks out the small, the irrelevant, and the marginal. I'm only skilled enough to show up on Sunday mornings with a Jesus who thinks glory looks like losing, sacrificing, and dying on behalf of those everybody else walked away from a long time ago. I hope once again that you'll forgive me my vocational inadequacies.

Apparently, the whole idea of "glory" needs a refresh if we're to be true to the life Jesus led.

In Graham Greene's, *The Power and the Glory*, the main character, a whiskey priest who has been hunted and pursued by the authorities through the whole book because religion has been outlawed, finally, wearily, hears the confession of the man who he knows will soon betray him.

After hearing his confession, the alcoholic priest thinks tiredly, "It was for this world that Christ had died; the more evil you saw and heard about, the greater glory lay around the death. It was too easy to die for what was good or beautiful, for home or children or a civilization—it needed a God to die for the half-hearted and the corrupt."

In a world where people aspire to climb to the top, this whole Jesus-thing makes more sense if he promises his followers prime seats at the State of the Union or in the board room. But when James and John ask for **those** seats when Jesus finally secures the glory everyone is certain he must be aiming at, he just rubs his eyes and slowly shakes his head.

“Do you still not get it? I’m on my way to confront the folks who make the laws and sign everybody’s paychecks. And I just got done telling you for the third time not only how that’s going to end up—with me dangling from a cross, the object of shame and ridicule—but that that’s the shape of the glory you’ve got to look forward to if you’re going to take this road trip with me. That’s the cup you drink, the baptism with which you’ll be baptized. That’s the ‘glory’ you’ve got to look forward to. Are you still sure you want a taste of **that** glory?”

And when the other ten disciples hear what’s going on, what do they do?

Once again they prove with uncanny precision that Jesus has yet to make a point that they won’t fall all over themselves to miss.

“Hey, wait a minute. James and John aren’t that special. We want the same thing they’re asking for. We want seats on the corporate jet too!”

In our minds we can see Jesus break the fourth wall, turn to the camera and roll his eyes so hard we can hear his pupils bouncing off the back of his skull.

But we've read to the end of the story, so we know Jesus ***achieved*** true glory.

He was finally exalted, lifted up before the eyes of the world.

The problem, though, for those who aspire to always be first in line is that when Jesus was lifted up before the eyes of the world, the only time he was high enough to look down on us from the heights of a glory almost no one sees as glorious ... was when he looked down at us from the cross. Because from up there you can see everyone—not just the people who run a world that benefits mostly themselves, but more importantly, the people such a world so regularly leaves behind—the sick, the poor, the grieving, the disempowered, and the disabled.

From up there, you can finally see the people who've been hidden in the shadows cast by a world where prestige is achieved by trampling those we've been taught it's permissible to ignore—those whose votes and access to the system have been stolen from them, those who've watched their children leave home never to return, those who've been told their stories can't possibly be true—and that even if those stories **are** true, we don't want to ruin a young man's life by taking them seriously.

From the cross you can see a world most people didn't even know existed.

But that's okay. The way God sees things, **that's** the true meaning of glory.

-Amen.