

Mark 10:32-45

Between the Matters

A sermon preached by
James F. McIntire

Text:
Mark 10:32-45

October 18, 2009



Hope United Methodist Church

Eagle & Steel Roads, Havertown, PA

Phone: 610-446-3351

Web: www.HavHopeUMC.org

Office: HopeUMCHavertown@verizon.net

Pastor: HopeUMCPastor@verizon.net

³²They 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, ³³saying, “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; ³⁴they will mock him, and spit upon him, and flog him, and kill him; and after three days he will rise again.”³⁵ 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.”³⁶ And he said to them, “What is it you want me to do for you?” ³⁷And they said to him, “Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory.” ³⁸But 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?” ³⁹They 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; ⁴⁰but 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.”⁴¹ When the ten heard this, they began to be angry with James and John. ⁴²So 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. ⁴³But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, ⁴⁴and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. ⁴⁵For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.”



We don't get it most of the time. We make an effort to try to sort things out and make sense of what's going on around us but mostly we just don't get it.

In so many instances today we get hung up on and stumble over the issue of race – whether it goes back to the OJ Simpson acquittal in 1995 or the banning of children from a pool in Huntington Valley, PA this past summer or even some of the very recent criticism of President Obama we often divide ourselves and our arguments by race as we say to each other, "Don't you get it? Don't you understand what's going on here? You wouldn't get it anyway – it's a black thing" or "... it's white thing."

I remember clearly the announcement of the OJ Simpson verdict and how we had different views, probably divided based upon one's race. One side was saying, "Finally, justice has been served" while the other side was saying, "How could that jury possibly have let him go?" Whenever we deal with any race-related issue it almost always comes down to us saying to each other, just as we say when we try to sort out so many divisive issues, "You just don't get it, do you?"

We divide when we try to sort out gender issues as well. "You just don't get it?", women say to men and men say to women. "You don't know what it's like being a woman," she says. "Oh yeah?" he says, "Well you don't know what it's like to be a man." And the more we try to understand each other, the less we seem to "get it".

In an episode of the television police drama "NYPD Blue," which was once my favorite TV show, the precinct split down gender lines over how a date rape case was being handled. The female officers and assistant district attorney jumped to the immediate conclusion that the rape victim was telling the truth and that the man she accused was guilty. The male officers were willing to doubt the woman's story because the accused man seemed believable in his account of the night as being one of mutual consent. Not until a second woman came forward with a similar story was the man charged with rape. The writers of the show created a tension in the precinct that brilliantly captured our "you just don't get it" attitude.

And sometimes I think we don't get this Jesus stuff either. The disciples 2000 years ago didn't get it and we disciples now don't get it. Listen to the story again. "They were on the road, going up to Jerusalem, and Jesus was walking ahead of them; they were amazed ..." – I can understand that, I'm sure Jesus did some pretty amazing things – "... and those who followed were afraid" – I can imagine that also, those not in the intimate circle of disciples might be afraid of what was going to happen in Jerusalem or afraid just because they weren't entirely sure what Jesus was up to.

But then he took aside his trusted twelve, those who had been with him for several years and explained to them for the third time the grim details of what he anticipated happening in Jerusalem. And the response? James and John said, "Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you" and they tried to get Jesus to promise that they will sit at his right and at his left in God's reign.

I can just imagine Jesus saying to the twelve, "You just don't get it, do you? You just don't get it. The more I explain it, the less you understand it." So he laid it out for them again, as plainly as anyone possibly could, exactly what he had been telling them – living for them – all along. "Whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all." But it seems like they never got it, not fully anyway. They must have understood something because the church was born and grew quickly based on a claim of understanding Jesus' teaching. But I don't think they – or we – fully get what Jesus is saying any more than we get the race issue or the gender issue or the sexuality issue or the disability issue or most any of the human issues that we struggle with daily. It comes out in fear – fear of anything "other" – racism, sexism, ableism, anti-Semitism, Islamophobia – fear of what we don't know or understand, what we don't get.

Jesus is trying to offer us a way to sort things out, to better understand how we could be – or should be – living now and how we will be living in God's reign that he has told us about. It's about sorting, about recognizing priorities and choosing carefully.

We think sorting means choosing between what matters and what doesn't matter. If you come down on the side of what matters most of the time, then you win the sorting game. Come down on the "doesn't matter" side too often and you lose. But it's more than that because there is something more than what matters and what doesn't matter.

In the 1984 movie "Places in the Heart", Sally Field is Edna Spaulding who lives in Waxahachie, Texas in 1935. Her life is changed dramatically by the shooting death of her husband, Royce, who is sheriff in this small Depression-era community. Sheriff Spaulding is called away from the dinner table to respond to a call about someone shooting a pistol by the train tracks. Spaulding finds a young, black man, Wiley, drunk and shooting at bottles he is throwing into the air. Wiley is willing to stop but then, without realizing what he's doing, he recklessly points the gun toward Spaulding and inadvertently pulls the trigger. The town's immediate punishment for Wiley was dragging him around town tied to a truck and then hanging him from a tree.

Mrs. Spaulding is now faced with being a single woman raising two very young children, Frank and Possum, having no idea how to write a check let alone keep her family financially supported. The local banker explains that there is still a mortgage on the house and that her best option would be to sell the house, send the children away to live with relatives, and start her life over. When she refuses to do that, insisting that she'll come up with the mortgage payment, the banker insists that she take in a boarder, his brother-in-law Mr. Will (John Malkovich) who is blind as the result of WWI.

Mrs. Spaulding decides that she can grow and sell cotton and if she is the first to get it to the cotton gin, she'll win enough extra prize money to meet the mortgage deadline. To help, she takes in a wanderer by the name of Moze (Danny Glover) who showed up at her back door the night of her husband's wake and stayed around to work for food. Moze, Mrs. Spaulding discovers, knows something about growing, picking, and selling cotton.

The movie *appears* to be about this seemingly helpless, young widow, a WWI veteran who is blind and appears to be bitter, a savvy, strong black man with no power in the segregated South, and two young children trying to survive in the depression of the 1930's by raising cotton, a daunting task for even experienced farmers. Intertwined with that story is an affair between Mrs. Spaulding's brother-in-law (Ed Harris) and the local school teacher (Amy Madigan), a tornado that rips through town destroying property and killing people, a violent encounter with the local KKK who wants Moze out of town, and the animosity of the cotton gin owner who doesn't want a woman to win the treasured prize.

I was taught to remember that nothing makes it into a movie by accident and that if something happens more than once, you better pay attention to it. In this movie, we hear Mr. Will's phonograph playing a recording for the blind, "Trent's Last Case" by E.C. Bently. The only part we ever hear is this opening line: "Chapter 1. Bad News. Between what matters and what seems to matter, how shall the world we know judge wisely ..." Twice we hear it. Once when Will first moves into the house near the beginning of the movie and then once as the cotton is finally being picked near the end of the movie.

"Between what matters and what seems to matter ..."

Notice that it's not what matters and what doesn't matter. What's important is that which is between what *seems* to matter and what *really* matters. What seems to matter in this movie is that Mrs. Spaulding's plan works and they survive by growing cotton and winning the prize money. What really matters is revealed at the end in one of the most powerful film scenes that I have ever witnessed.

While gathered in church one Sunday morning, the preacher reads 1 Corinthians 13, Paul's summary about love being patient and kind and not boastful or arrogant or rude. And then the church shares in communion. As the choir sings "In the Garden", the plate of bread and tray of cups is passed in the pews as each person

hands it to the next. Everything seems normal as we see Mrs. Spaulding's sister and brother-in-law and the banker and some of the local people passing the elements. But then we begin to see people that had left town earlier in the movie and then even people who had been killed by the tornado. Suddenly, we know something different is going on with this communion. Then Moze who had left town after being beaten by the Klan was there in the pew as well, with no cuts or bruises on his face. He hands the tray to Mr. Will who passes it on to the children who then pass it on to Mrs. Spaulding. She takes communion and passes it on to the man sitting next to her without even looking.

Suddenly we realize that, with the words "the peace of God", she has just passed communion to her husband who had been killed at the beginning of the movie. While still trying to figure out how that is possible, we realize that he then passes it to Wiley, the man who shot him who says back to the sheriff, "the peace of God."

"Between what matters and what seems to matter ..."

In this movie, what really matters is what happens at the end. The community has gathered – the entire community – receiving the peace of God from one another. It's an amazing scene. And for us what really matters – not what just *seems* to matter but what *really* matters – is what happens at the end. Then it is revealed to us that we are all God's children whoever we are, however powerful or powerless, however our lives have been lived. We all share in the same meal and are all loved by the same God in the same way. And if we are fortunate, we might get a glimpse of that revelation now and maybe just grasp the vision beforehand and live it in the present.

But mostly we just don't get it. We try and we try and we try to understand but we just don't get it. How could those people all end up sharing the same bread and cup? How could they be in church together? We try to sort it out on our own terms but it doesn't work. Because never in our sorting would Sheriff Spaulding and Wiley end up at the same table. Never would

Spaulding give Wiley communion and Wiley offer to Spaulding the peace of God. Never in our sorting would Moze and the local Klansmen be eating from the same loaf. Never in our sorting would the powerful and the powerless drink from the same cup.

But that's the way *we* sort it out, not the way God sorts it out. The greatest truth from Jesus in his conversation with the disciples is that we don't get to do the sorting. God does. And in God's sorting, the table is full and the last will be first.

That's what we have such a hard time getting. It's not our sorting that matters so much. It's God's sorting. That's what the Jesus stuff is all about. To be great you must be a servant. The first will be last and the last will be first not because we sort it out that way but because God sorts it out that way. Jesus couldn't promise James and John the left and right hand seats because only God can sort it out.

What we're able to work on sorting out is the between stuff. In the movie, between what seems to matter – the success of Spaulding's cotton venture – and what really matters – the sharing of God's peace – between those two brackets a lot of things happen. And all that "between" is life.

Life happened to those people in that small town. The affair between the brother-in-law and the teacher has come and gone, the tornado has come and gone, the traveling band in town for a local dance has come and gone, the cotton pickers have come and gone, the Klan has come and gone, Moze has done his job and moved on – between what matters and what seems to matter there is a lot of living going on. All those little things that happen are what the between is all about.

Life moved on. The courthouse bell rang throughout signaling the movement of time. Life continued through all the trials and tribulations of Waxahachie, Texas. All that between-ness was filled with whatever the days brought. Did they live those days knowing that when it really matters the last will be

first? Who knows. Do we live our between-ness in that same knowledge? Who knows. But I know for me it's about time I started paying attention to what's between what matters and what seems to matter.

We go about our days as if what we're doing matters. We grow up, we go to school, we go to work, we raise our kids, we send them to school, we survive another day and then another year and somehow it all seems to matter. We act like we're sorting out the important things, but really we're just in the between, between what seems to matter and what really matters.

One Monday morning while I lived in the Germantown neighborhood in Philadelphia, I saw a man who had been a member of our church slowly climbing the steps to his boarding home so I stopped to see how he's doing. He barely survives in our world, continually struggling to make ends meet, barely having a place to shelter him from the weather. We had a brief conversation and then he asked me, "Do you have an extra nickel?" My heart sank. What really matters anyway? Here I was hopping out of my nice mini-van, standing there in my warm coat, on my way to my comfortable office, and all my friend wants is a nickel. That's the between that we live in, where value is measured by where you are on the ladder.

The next day, Tuesday, I saw a man in the supermarket obviously responding to voices that only he heard, standing right inside the entrance so we all had to walk around him. He came down the same aisle where I was picking out diapers, extended his hand and said, "Hi, what's your name?" I shook his hand and answered, "Jim. What's yours?" "Greg," he said, and then went on to tell me his last name and where he worked and what he was doing in the store, although I didn't quite understand what he was telling me. As I saw him wandering up and down the aisles, stopping occasionally to talk to the voices in his head which distracted him, I felt frustrated because other people were ignoring him or looking at him like he was a threat. He was just trying to shop – and be friendly. But that's the between we live in, where we fear each other more than care about each other.

That same week, I visited a man in an intensive care unit at a local hospital. He had had a severe heart attack and has been comatose. His wife said to me that the most difficult thing to understand is how one minute he could have been perfectly fine laughing and talking and planning for their 25th anniversary and the next minute he became a very different person, still her husband but in a different way. What seems to matter one minute really doesn't matter so much the next minute and what really matters is off in the distance yet to be revealed to us when we gather at that table. Where we are now is in the between.

That week started with one reality check and ended with another. And it made me begin asking the question: What is it that we are to be doing with whatever is between what matters and what seems to matter? What is it that we are to do with this life that is the between? That week led me to conclude that what I can do – what I have tried to do since that brief moment in my life – what I know that I *must* do – is love the best way that I can.

That means watching out for that man who needed that nickel, seeing that no one takes advantage of him, checking in on him, being a friend to him. That means continuing to say hi to the Gregs of this world and to resist the fear that tries to invade what my faith calls me to do. That means continuing to pray for all who struggle with whatever situations are going on for them.

What that week led me to know is that to live in this between means that we must care for each other in whatever ways we can imagine God would care for us. Jesus tried to tell us that God's sorting makes the first last and the last first. Maybe that's the kind of sorting we should be doing as well. What my week reinforced for me is that for God the first will be last and the last will be first, to be great I must be a servant. And if I want to be faithful, I need to live that truth in the between.

Amen.