

Find your Life. Lose your Life.

Mark 10

There's something for everyone in Mark chapter 10. If you have access to the entire chapter, you can almost see this just by glancing at the headings provided in many versions of the text. Scan these and you will see:

- Verses 13-16 are addressed to children. My text has the heading "Jesus Blesses the Little Children."
- The passages entitled "The Rich Man" and the passage about the "Request from James and John" are about adulthood. Though the passage uses the term "man," I understand the passage to be about grown persons more generally.
- And also perhaps not as obvious, but as I read our passage for today (as a chaplain to senior adults), I see a passage about my elders.

Okay. Get your Mark chapter 10 bingo cards ready- you've got three spaces- Children, Adults and senior adults.

Childhood Dinner Memory

Let's begin with children. Let's hop in the way back machine...for some of you it might be the way, way back machine and... ponder with me here for a moment...see if you can connect with this scene.

You're a child of maybe 7 or 8. You're standing at your childhood dinner table. The table is all set with the effort and intentionality used only for special occasions. This won't be an evening of scraping the bottom of leftover pans or scrambling mid-meal for a forgotten fork. Oh no...everything is already laid out and the kitchen air is rich with the scent of foods saved for feasting. What foods were saved for special occasions growing up? Can you conjure the scent?

Whatever, you are eating.. you are eating it with guests tonight. You're still standing at the table and your eyes play over the place settings. Everything is laid out perfectly and there are extra settings. The leaf has been added to enlarge the table and extra chairs have been pulled up. A series of related questions race through your mind, "Where are the guests sitting? Where am I sitting? Most importantly, will I be sitting next to the guests?"

Can I sit with you? That's the question.

And it's a question for good reason, because children have to sit close to adults with special status because innocence and cuteness aside, they really have little going for them. They look to adults to meet all of their needs, to learn who they are, and to teach them how to make their way in the world.

Think about it for a moment. Children come into the world with literally nothing. As the passage in Job proclaims, "Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked I will depart."

Infants are born without a name. They don't have a stitch of clothing. They don't have a special skills resume, but they do know how to ask for others to meet their needs. They innocently and beautifully develop their sense of self by begging...

Can I sit with you?

Return to the dinner table. Hold your innocent searching in your mind. You're still there pouring over the table setting wondering, "Will I be seated next to the guest?" Can you feel the desire and perhaps a bit of urgency behind the question? You submit your plea ...Mom...Dad... I got nothin. I need to sit next to Aunt Linda. I need to get up close like I'm warming my hands by a fire. I've got to feel the heat, have a piece of her significance, grow in my identity.. Can I sit next to her? This is the plea of a child desperately trying to find his life.

Can I sit with you?

When meaningful substance is imparted it feels like love and affection...it sounds like chosenness. In the Hebrew Scriptures it sounds like YHWH saying to Abraham-- "I choose YOU, I will give YOU land, I will give YOU more children than you can count....YOU...YOU ... I will sit next to YOU at dinner.

Can I sit with you?

This is question born of an innocent weakness

Children, in the weakness that comes with their young bodies and minds, need to find their life...they need to find identity, substance and some measure of autonomy and control in their lives.

Jesus said you need to lose your life, to find your life. But children haven't built up their lives yet. They don't have a life to lose, so when children come into this world-- finding a life is the first order of business.

So Jesus says, let the little ones come to me because they got nothin' and they need to get something...they need to find a life.

Can you find the child that still lives inside you? The part of you that still aches with this question? Can you feel the urgency of this question in your body? What a beautifully innocent, understandable and tender question.

You aren't alone with your dinner table question. You share it with the disciples, James and John.

Can I sit with you?

This question is most appropriate for children, but for most of us the question really never goes away.

For those of you who are keeping track at home with your bingo card...I just finished calling children and I'm about to speak about adulthood.

Adulthood

James and John were adults, but they still had the same question burning inside them...can I sit with you. So, if you read the passage or if you remember it from last week, they ask Jesus...Jesus, Can we sit with you in your glory?

The difference between children and these two disciples is they have climbed the mountaintop of adulthood. Their dad was a fisherman and we can assume that by the time they were following Jesus they had apprenticed with their father. They had a trade, they had job skills and a gifted rabbi had chosen them to be his followers. They might not be rich in all senses of the word, but they certainly weren't impoverished. In some ways, they were your average middle class folks. Not poor, but not in the 1% either. They were functional adults and they have reached the top and now they want...

- To ascend and never come down
- To never have the bad things we read about in the paper or see on tv ever happen to them

It's as if they want to rewrite the biblical stories to create a world where ...

- They can build a tower of Babel that'll never be destroyed
- Where Jacob can become Israel without wrestling God and without the wounding and the limp
- Where Jesus can resurrect and ascend without suffering and dying

They are trying to make a deal where... The bad things in life never happen to them. It's like.... And we all make this kind of deal where we say...

- If I work hard and play by the rules, I can pull myself up by my bootstraps
- If I buckle up and drive safely, the really bad car accidents won't happen to me.

The requests of James and John are like a young man walking the halls of a nursing home saying... I hope I never have to use a walker or wheelchair like him...or lose my sight like her...or suffer from dementia like them.

Jesus, can I sit with you?

James and John....you and I...we don't see clearly. We see weakness as something to avoid at all costs.

James and John are asking hopefully-- Jesus, any chance the pattern could be living, living some more and then rising? No, Jesus says, the pattern is finding your life and then giving it away.

That's what he tells the rich man. You've got so much...not just money...but you have the resources and riches...the status and the capital of life...could you just give a bit of it away?

I think we read about the rich man and say, "well I don't really have as much money as the family with the big house down the street...I'm not rich...this passage isn't about me. Well, let's think about riches a bit more broadly. Do you have a job? A career? Do you have someone you can call if you are in trouble? Do you know how to make your way in the world? Well then, you are, in a sense, rich.

What are you to do with these riches? Give them away. Lose your life. Give the single parent in your life a night off. Allow that adjunct professor in your department to be the first author on the next journal article. Take time out of your busy schedule to visit with an elderly neighbor.

Start letting go bit by bit of the time, status, money, influence and power you hold dear. Why?

Because, it's as Jesus says.

- The rich don't get into heaven. Children do.
- The strong don't inherit the kingdom. The poor in spirit do.
- The first are not first. In the final analysis, the last are first.
- The way up is not up. In the final analysis, the way down is the way up (Richard Rohr, *Falling Upward*).

Start letting go of things. Why? Because as you age, life will come to you and like the guest in Jesus' parable who takes the seat of honor and then must take the walk of shame after being asked to give up his seat. In the same way, Your colleagues will come to you and say-- Tom, have you started to think about retirement?

Your adult children will come to you and say..

- Dad, it's time to give up the keys to the car
- Mom, you can't live alone anymore

The question is how do you see power? Is it to be hoarded or given away?

Blind Bartimaeus Sees

Ok. For those who haven't torn up their bingo cards, I'm about to call senior adults. I know. The jokes aren't funny, but this is what you get when you let a nursing home chaplain preach-- bingo jokes.

The Blind Bartimeus sees what James, John and the rich man can't see. That power is to be given away and that weakness, when it comes your way is to be accepted.

The story of the blind man comes at the end of a distinct section of this gospel and right before Jesus' own great diminishment.

Jesus is about to ride into Jerusalem, not on a conquering war horse as some would have hoped, but upon a donkey. He is about to be arrested and upon Christ's arrest, the authorities show up and Jesus immediately goes limp... passive into the night. He is led away, manhandled by the authorities, whipped, helped in carrying his cross, nailed to the cross. After his arrest, like a patient at the end of life, he no longer does anything; others do it for him and to him. He is passive, a patient in the hands of others.

Jesus did not go out and seek his suffering, and when it came his way he asked with great anguish- Can this cup pass from me? Jesus didn't want to suffer and die, but he knew "if I don't go away, the Spirit will not come to you (John 16:7)." Some scholars believe that Jesus is speaking of his own spirit here. The distilled spirit essence of his life, death and character released into the world when he goes away.

You may have experienced spirit being released into your world when someone you love has to leave (to go on a trip, to begin a new life, or to depart from us through death) initially that will feel painful, sometimes excruciatingly so. But when that leaving is necessitated by duty or by life itself then, no matter how hard it is, even if it is death itself that takes away our loved one, eventually he or she will come back to us in a deeper way, in a presence that is warm, nurturing, and immune to the fragility of normal relationships.

In our helplessness and passivity we can give something which is deeper than what we can give through our strength and activity. In our weakness we can give away something we can never give away in our power. In our passivity and in our weakness our spirit can "bless the world with the way we die" (Ron Rolheiser, *Insane For the Light*).

Henri Nouwem commented-- in his last book before his death-- "The great mystery of Jesus' life is that he fulfilled his mission not in action, but in passivity, not by what he did, but by what was done to him, not by his own decision but by other people's decisions concerning him. It was when he was dying on the cross that he cried out, 'it is fulfilled.'"

So it's no great surprise that we meet a diminished man... a blind beggar, sitting by the roadside just before we learn of Jesus' own victorious passivity.

Bartimaeus spends his days sitting, waiting, hoping others will take up his needs and desires and act in all of the many ways he is powerless to act for himself.

He hopes they will drop a little money on his cloak.

Powerless as he is with his failing eyesight, he doesn't know where Jesus is in the crowd, he has to wait until Jesus calls him to come over.

Come. Sit with me.

We can see that Bartimaeus has been shaped by his powerlessness and has come to accept his diminishment. We know this from his prayer of utter and total reliance-- Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!

Can you hear his desperation? It's that same desperation born not of adult greed, but of child-like dependence.

Can I sit with you?

Bartimeaus used to see once upon a time. Ironically, now his blindness has given him true sight into powerlessness. His diminishment has prepared his heart.

As Nicolas Wolterstorff says, "The valley of the shadow of death is a vale of soul-making."

Bartimeaus' soul is ready.

Come, Sit with me.

Bartimeaus has one last shred of precious autonomy, a cloak he would have used as a receptacle for the donations given to him by those who take pity on him. It might be a pathetic little resource, but he casts even this aside as he responds to Jesus' call.

Come! Sit here. Next to me.