

TEXT: Mark 10:35-45

TOPIC: After Jesus' third prediction, James and John upset the disciples vying for preferred seating.

SUBJECT: James and John's request is a repeat of earlier predictions; what's done with that matters.

TITLE: If It's Repeated ...

We're going to have a little fun this morning with today's message. Before we do that, I need to explain why.

When I was in seminary, my New Testament professor had several things he would emphasize, so we would not forget things he wanted us to learn. My professor was born in New Zealand, so he had that English brogue when he spoke, and when he would lecture, his lectures were often quite entertaining.

The one I remember the best is Dr. Carter's "if it's repeated, it must be important." Even today, I can post "If it's repeated ..." on Facebook, some of my classmates will inevitably comment, "It must be important."

Basically what "if it's repeated, it must be important" means is that throughout the New Testament, there are times writers will repeat things, and Mark's gospel is no exception. Three times Jesus predicts his death, and three times his disciples exhibit similar behaviors. Since the disciples' behavior keeps repeating itself, the writer of Mark is making an important point.

So, today, when I say "if it's repeated" I will listen for a chorus of "it must be important" replies, so be prepared.

The first time Jesus predicts his death, it is sandwiched between Peter's declaration that Jesus is the Christ and Jesus' prediction and Peter's rebuke. Jesus tells Peter, "Get behind me, Satan" because Peter is thinking about worldly things rather than eternal things.

The second time Jesus predicts his death, the disciples start squabbling about which of them is the greatest. Once again, the disciples focus on worldly things rather than eternal things, so ... wait for it.

If it's repeated ...

Finally, in the verses just preceding today's reading Jesus predicts his death a third time. This time the disciples blow it off before James and John want to know who will sit on the left and the right when Jesus comes into his glory. Once again, earthly things rather than eternal things.

So, if it's repeated ...

Which raises what I believe is an important question. If Jesus disciples found it difficult to learn from Jesus so they could follow him, what is it like for us? I'm not asking this as a criticism. I'm asking the question because I think it's an important question to wrestle with, so our faith may be more complete.

Just think of James and John's request. They asked if they could be at Jesus' left and right when he came into glory. When Jesus was crucified – when he was coming into his glory – who was on his left and his right? Bandits. Musician Rhett Walker's describes the bandits as people who couldn't save themselves if they tried. I like his description because I don't know of anyone who hasn't been the one on the left full of guilt and regret who feels long gone on the wrong side of living or the one on the right always looking for a fight thinking we can never be forgiven."

As I see it, Mark is doing something else. He's telling a story slightly different than the one we heard about last week with the rich young man. The problem the rich young man had

was that he was more possessed by what he possessed than he was free of it. Apparently, James and John – unknowingly – have the same problem. They're possessed by expectations of glory, might, and power. They're possessed by idea of who is greatest among the disciples. They are possessed by their egos and their ambitions.

Jesus' words and life are just the opposite of what seems to be our natural tendency to think about power, leadership, and all of life, particularly when people side with the values the world has rather than the humility Christ exhibits. I think it's important to let that sink in.

Too often, I have seen people being like the disciples for another reason. Too often prefer safety and comfort to doing what's right and difficult and risky even when doing what's difficult and risky means taking a really hard look at ourselves, so we can respond to God's vision and mission for our lives.

Here's an example. One of the traits I've repeatedly seen in the last decade or so are folks who seem to be fearful to stand up for what's right, and failing to do so has consequences. I saw this through disaffiliations. I've seen it in personal experiences. And I've witnessed it over and over. Think of it like you have ten people. Often one or two people at the top will single out one or two people at the bottom of society, and isolate those two at the bottom from the six in the middle, who just want to get along but fear opposing those at the top will plunge them to the two at the bottom even though those at the top are dehumanizing the two at the bottom. In the meantime, people on the fringes of the 10 will end up hurt by the fears of the six in the middle. I've seen it over and over and over again.

And this seems to happen over and over and over again. So, if it's repeated ...

Get the picture?

It's almost as though Jesus' third prediction of his death would have each of us ask how willing we are to let humility shape us into the person God needs each of us to be? How willing are we to let ourselves be humbled, so we take risks of faith? How willing are we to set aside ambitions not connected with God for the sake of going to places or doing things that seem scary and risky and even dangerous? Ultimately, how willing are we to follow Jesus all the way to the cross? How willing are we to let God give us a designation like Jesus had because Christ is not a last name; it's a designation.

After all, Jesus doesn't call us to go to the cross but to follow him on his way to the cross. As someone I read this week suggested, "the goal is not about the safe practice of simply worshiping Jesus; the goal is about practicing a daring, self-giving form of discipleship."

When people let that happen – when people lose themselves in service to others – that's when they start living more fully than ever before.

It seems to me that when people repeat what the disciples eventually did, following Christ is even more worth it than most ever imagine just in a different and much more satisfying way because the task of following Jesus is following him, not just worshiping him.

And that's repeated over and over and over in the New Testament. So, if it's repeated ...

In the name of the triune God – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – one God in perfect community. Amen.