

TWENTY-FIRST SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST | OCTOBER 17, 2021

ISAIAH 53:4-12 | PSALM 91:9-16 | HEBREWS 5:1-10 | MARK 10:35-45

After a weekend of college football rampant with missed field goals a couple of years ago, some producers at ESPN tried a little experiment. They trolled through the internet and tracked down a number of people who had declared—in the self-righteous tone you only find on social media—that they could have made those field goals no problem. And they invited these would-be Justin Tuckers to actually try kicking a field goal on national television. Even once these people see how far away the field goal is, the confidence just oozes out of them. *I can do it. Yea, let's go. Easy.* The results were, to put it charitably, awful.

We tend to overestimate our abilities at things we haven't done. The psychologist David Dunning, a noted researcher on self-awareness, puts it this way. "Incompetent people do not recognize—scratch that, cannot recognize—just how incompetent they are."¹ After all, if you knew enough to realize how bad you are, you would know enough to be good. That's true not just for kicking field goals, but for a whole range of human life. Learning a new language, playing an instrument, picking up a new hobby, and using grammar correctly, to say nothing of the most obvious example where people overestimate their competence: driving.

Psychologists call this the Dunning-Krueger effect. We could also call it the James-John effect.

In today's gospel reading, Jesus has just finished telling his disciples about how he will be crucified and rise from the dead after three days. James and John, seemingly uninterested in this rising from the dead stuff, approach Jesus and say, "Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory."

This probably sounds familiar. You might remember a couple of weeks ago we heard the disciples arguing about who was the best disciple. That was annoying, but this is even worse. This isn't just about who's the best at following Jesus now. It's about being number one in the age to come. Not just being slightly better than the people around you but getting a place close to Jesus for eternity.

Jesus replies, "You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink?" In the Hebrew Bible, the cup is often used as a way to talk about an experience of suffering. Jesus is redirecting their attention toward his death and resurrection in Jerusalem. And sure enough, in Mark's gospel, that cup image shows up at the Last Supper when Jesus promises that he won't drink the "fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God," which he does on the cross. And in the garden of Gethsemane, Jesus asks that his Father remove this cup from him.

¹ David Dunning, "We Are All Confident Idiots," Pacific Standard, accessed October 14, 2021, <https://psmag.com/social-justice/confident-idiots-92793>.

So, Jesus asks, “Are you able to go through that?” *I can do it. Yea, let’s go. Easy.* That response is interesting on two levels. One is that the disciples clearly don’t really understand what Jesus is talking about. Which, you know, nothing new to see here.

But the second is a little deeper. Not only do James and John misunderstand Jesus, but they misunderstand themselves. The stories, the perceptions, the projections they carry really have very little in common with what’s actually happening. They have ideas about what kind of people they are and what they would do in a given situation, but those ideas are detached from reality. We often feel that we never really know other people, that even when you know someone for decades, there’s some part of them that’s beyond our grasp. But St. Mark takes it a step further and says that we often don’t really know ourselves.

In the case of people who can’t kick field goals, that lack of self-awareness is comic. But in the case of James and John, that lack of self-awareness is tragic. Because for the disciples, that moment of awareness only comes too late. After all, Jesus says, “The cup that I drink you will drink.” You’re going to go through some experience of loss and disorientation and disillusionment.

But you won’t realize exactly what’s happening. There won’t be TV cameras and bright lights that let you know this is the big moment, and you’re about to get your opportunity to enter into glory. No, you’ll spend your life wondering when you’re going to get to the “real” thing. A real chance to make a difference, a real chance to do something meaningful, a real chance to do something worthy of the calling God has placed on your life, and then realize that the moment’s already come and gone.

And that’s why it’s important that Jesus picks up a second image. Not just drinking the cup but sharing in Jesus’s baptism. This is sort of a weird twist in the story. The stuff about drinking the cup sort of makes sense, but what’s baptism have to do with any of this? And wasn’t Jesus baptized by John? Why’s he talking about his baptism as a thing that’s going to happen in the future?

Well, remember that baptism comes from the word for “immersion.” When Jesus speaks about his coming baptism, he’s talking about his passion. Being immersed in the forces of death. When you read Mark’s passion, the story isn’t of one person who is out to kill Jesus. It’s of a system that closes in, where no one is ever really responsible, where there’s no way to get out. In his passion, Jesus goes “under” in a situation, a system, where he doesn’t have control. And when he touches bottom, he finds himself next to two criminals, one at his right hand and one at his left hand.

In the early church when baptisms involved not just a gesture of water but a real immersion, the resonance was obvious: going under the water (death) and re-emerging with Christ (life). Baptism joins us to Christ in that experience. When we “go under” the waters, Christ is already there. When we are overwhelmed by death,

Christ is already there. And when we are immersed in suffering, Christ is under the waves with us.

Baptism doesn't get you a way out of suffering and death and the perils of existence. You notice in this story that Jesus doesn't offer John and James an option of experiencing his baptism. No, he says that they're going to. The choice isn't immersion or not. It's whether you see Christ in the face of the deep or not.

That's not the way James and John think about it, and it's not our first choice, either. After all, we so often tell ourselves that to become more aware of ourselves, to truly find ourselves, we need to get away from the world. That the "real" you is deep inside somewhere, and if you could just get some peace and quiet and stop having to deal with these incorrigible people all day, you could finally get to your "true" self.

The image Jesus gives us is radically different. The way we find ourselves, that we become aware of the meaning of our lives, isn't by withdrawing from the world but by becoming more deeply immersed in it. "Whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant." And service means being immersed in the experiences, aspirations, and hopes of other people.

Mark's Jesus says that if you think you will enter into glory by a heroic act or a brave stance or an intelligent insight, you're probably setting yourself up for failure. Because the moment will come and go. Prophets are only heroes in hindsight.

No, Mark's Jesus says that the way to glory is through baptism. We are seated at the right hand of Christ not when we transcend the world. But when we live out our baptisms alongside Christ deep in the world's chaos. Glory isn't something that can be achieved by our own achievements but only received again and again and again.

Are we able to enter into glory? The answer, of course, is no. But we are always living in Christ. And through our baptisms, he is always at hand.

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