

“Gotcha”

Much of the time and for many of us, church can seem to be about somebody else. On any given weekend people come for all sorts of reasons, many of them seeming to have little directly to do with religious conviction. For some of us it’s a job, paid or unpaid, so we more or less have to be here because we’re singing in the choir or greeting at the door or reading scripture or preaching... better show up if you’re preaching! For some of us it’s a family thing: our parents make us come, our spouses expect us to come, we come to bring the kids. We can come out of habit or a sense of duty. We can come to see other people, because we like the music, in the hope of hearing something interesting, because we like to see children or we crave an adult conversation, because we like to get out in public to give our immune system a workout. Church can be a lot like exercise: we don’t always really want to do it, but we’re generally glad to have done it.

It may surprise you to hear that I think all of this is good... or good enough, at any rate. If everything we did were only from the purest of motives, most of us wouldn’t do very much.

But this sermon isn’t about all of that. This sermon is about the times—those rare and precious times—when God reaches out and grabs hold of us and says, “Gotcha!” These are moments when we find ourselves both unmasked and embraced, when we are revealed and redeemed. God says, “I know who you really are and I love you, anyway. You can’t hide from me and you don’t have to.” These are moments when faith meets us right where we live. Gotcha.

The disciples don’t fully know it yet, but they are at the beginning of a moment like that in this morning’s lesson, because they are painfully and embarrassingly laid bare. A powerful sense of déjà vu sets in here. If you’ve been counting, this is the third time Jesus has predicted that he will go to Jerusalem where he will be rejected, arrested, tortured and killed. And each time he is met with misunderstanding. It ranges from an outright argument with Peter in chapter 8 to timid silence in chapter 9 to no recorded response here in chapter 10. But each time the disciples manage to convey that they do not understand, they do not agree, or both.

Today, in the immediate aftermath of Jesus' third passion prediction, James and John make the totally inappropriate and wildly ironic request, "... to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory." It's a dual image of positions of privilege at a banquet, and power and influence when Jesus reigns as king. And it's completely out of keeping with all Jesus has been teaching about being a servant to others and losing your life to find true and eternal life. The really ironic part is that when Jesus is "lifted up" it will be on a cross; and there will be people on his right and on his left: criminals crucified along with him. This is hardly what James and John have in mind.

So Jesus tells them they don't know what they're asking. To share in Jesus' destiny is to share in his suffering. Are they ready for this? He offers two images: baptism, here to be thought of as immersion, ritual drowning; and a cup of suffering, which Jesus himself later prays might pass from him. (14:36) Can James and John share these? They say they are able, much in the same manner that couples promise to love one another "for better, for worse" (How bad can it get?) or we pledge in baptism to help raise other people's children. They are saying the right words, but they don't really understand what they're getting into.

So Jesus tells them that they will indeed share his suffering, but positions of privilege are not his to grant. How can one who eschews all privilege be the one to grant it?

Well, it's bad that these disciples don't understand, but at least it's just a problem with James and John, right? Wrong! The other ten, hearing that James and John are jockeying for privilege, are angry because they want a piece of the action, too! They all have the same disease that gives them thick heads, hard hearts and deaf ears. So Jesus calmly and patiently calls them together and tells them one more time: this hierarchy stuff is the way the Gentiles behave. In this context that means that lording it over others is for people who don't know God. You do not behave that way: "... whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all." They are following Jesus, and Jesus is going not to a coronation, but to the cross.

Almost lost here are signs of hope in what is to come. Encouragement is infrequent in Mark, so we have to take it wherever we find it. Remember that in all three passion predictions, Jesus said he would rise again. And here he asserts that he came to give his life as a "ransom for many." This is not suffering for the sake of suffering; it is suffering that comes as the result of Jesus' determination to meet violence with love. He will not perpetuate the

cycle of hatred and violence. He will suffer violence rather than amplify it. And the very symbols of his trials will become symbols of new life: baptism as the sacrament of incorporation into the Body of Christ; and the cup of the new covenant as a symbol of God's forgiving love, in the sacrament of communion. Jesus' love will conquer death.

Notice: Jesus is saying all this to disciples who have proven themselves unworthy. He has no illusions about his followers. By now surely he knows that they will not understand what is about to happen until they have been through it, if then. This is a "Gotcha" moment in the sense that he reveals them for who they are. But it is also a "Gotcha" moment in the sense that Jesus has their back. He picks them up when they fall. He forgives them when they fall short. And so they are still together, with many "Gotchas" yet to come.

In the upper room he will tell them that one of them will deny him, one of them will betray him, and all will flee. They don't believe him, they can't imagine what is in their own hearts until it is revealed to them, until the soldiers' arrival and the traitor's kiss and the crowing of the cock unfold just as Jesus said they would. "Gotcha!" But he goes to the cross without remorse and without recrimination not only for his enemies but particularly for his faithless friends. It's one thing to forgive your enemies, but it's way harder to forgive your friends when they let you down.

It's really tempting to hold this lesson off at a distance and marvel at those dim bulbs Jesus has for disciples! But it doesn't take a huge leap of the imagination for us to see ourselves in them, and to notice how we structure things in the church to resemble the hierarchies of the Gentiles as much as the servanthood of Jesus. This lesson is less a window than a mirror, and I for one can see myself all through it, bringing to mind occasions on which I was both unmasked and embraced, whether I knew it or not.

I've shared this story once before, but it was quite a while ago. I began seminary in 1971 in a state of turmoil. I was engaged to be married, my fiancée was pregnant, I was in Connecticut and she was in Missouri and I was having second thoughts. This was the first serious relationship I had ever been in. We had known each other less than a year. And when I was being honest with myself—something I tried to do as infrequently as I could manage—I had to admit that overall I was happier when she wasn't around. But I wanted to do the right thing, and I was not at all sure what that was.

I talked the situation over with a good friend who suggested I go to see Jim Dittes, a Professor of Psychology and Religion at Yale. If I had met him first I never would have gone to talk to him: he was way too smart and way too scary. But I did not know him and I was really hurting, so I called him up and made an appointment. He was about an hour late. After the introductions I began to describe my situation to him. He pretty much never looked at me. Occasionally he would grunt or nod. He probably asked a couple of clarifying questions, but I really don't remember any of that. What I remember is the sensation of me talking and talking and talking and talking and talking. Whenever I paused there was silence, and so I filled it up with more talking. Finally I stopped to see what would happen. He looked up and he said to me (I promise you that these are his *exact* words), "Well, you may not be capable of making a strong, healthy decision; but at least you're good at adapting yourself to whatever other people decide for you." Wow.

I wasn't angry, exactly. But it was kind of like getting a pet llama for Christmas: what in the world am I supposed to do with this? I think I thanked him... that would square with the diagnosis of a people-pleaser with no soul. And I wandered off in a daze, determined to prove him wrong. I spent the next two years proving him right and discovering very painfully the limits of my adaptive capabilities. Gotcha.

Two years later, I had been through the ringer. I had been married and divorced. I was working nearly full time in a church. And I had taken a couple of classes with Jim Dittes, but I had no clue whether he remembered our talk. So when the faculty offered to have students to their homes for dessert, a friend and I signed up to go to Dittes's. My moment with him came when he was trying to build a fire in the fireplace. In order to talk with him I had to get down on my knees—the posture of the penitent. I said, "I don't know if you remember this, but I came to see you a couple of years ago when I was trying to decide whether or not to get married. You were hurrying in from someplace else and we talked for about forty-five minutes." He looked at me. Brutally honest, he said simply, "No." I shared some of the details of my situation as I remembered them. "No." Desperate not to think that my life's story could be so forgettable I said, "At the end you said, 'Well, you may not be capable of making a strong, healthy decision; but at least you're good at adapting yourself to whatever other people decide for you.'" At that he lit up like a Christmas tree. "Oh, yes!" he said, "I remember that. But you seem like a very different person to me now." Gotcha.

Jim Dittes preached at my ordination. He came to our wedding when Priscilla and I were married on Easter Sunday afternoon in 1977. He died in August of this year.

To be painfully revealed in our duplicity and lovingly embraced for who we are is the “Gotcha” of God. To quote my favorite line from Carlisle Marney, “You shall know the truth and the truth will make you *flinch*... and then it will make you free.” Sometimes this happens in moments that are hinges in our lives. But once we feel God working in this way we see it happening to us and in us over and over again... sometimes even in church, where it turns out that this story is about us, after all.

The dim-witted, stumblebum disciples are on the road to Jerusalem, where they will discover who they truly are... and who God is. Thanks be to God.

Amen

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