

10/21/2018 Sermon

-One of the true skills of childhood, I believe, if you have a brother or a sister is the art of claiming “shot-gun” in the car. For those of you never did this as a kid (maybe I am the only one who did I don’t know), but “shot-gun” is referring to the front passenger (shot-gun) seat of the vehicle. For a kid, the front passenger seat is, ofcourse, the best place to be: the most room, the best ability to look out, not to mention the highly powerful blessing of being in charge of the radio. I’m sure many of you might have stories of how you perfected this skill of claiming shot-gun. I liked the “getting in the front seat first and then locking all the car doors so my little brother was left outside” approach. I molded this skill quite effectively and dare I say got the shot-gun seat many times.

-Sometimes, of course, I outrightly got booted from the front seat by my parents. Especially on longer trips, my mom (with my dad driving) always got the front passenger seat because she had all of the snacks, extra clothes, and maps needed for the journey with her. Some of us grew up in the early era of airbag systems where children of all ages were discouraged from sitting in front. Now, modern cars have all of these sensors that can sense if a child is in the front seat or not and adjust the airbag deployment accordingly. But, older cars didn’t have that and you had to be a certain height and weight in order not to be injured by the powerful airbag deploying god forbid if you were involved in an accident. Thus, many friends I know never really got to sit in the shotgun seat and experience the raw power that encompassed this position in the vehicle (such a travesty).

-In reading this gospel text today, I really had to suppress my old shot-gun desire because this is almost exactly what the disciples are doing with Jesus.

-Let’s take just a moment to ask: how old were the disciples?

-Most biblical historians put Jesus’ disciples at around 15, 16, or 17 years of age. Now, scripture doesn’t give us any of their drivers’ licenses with birth dates, but historians have pieced together some clues that the bible alludes to. Firstly, no man was allowed to marry in Jewish tradition until they were 20 and the only disciple whom is mentioned as having a wife is

Peter (the book of Matthew). Secondly, from an education standpoint, it was common for a male to seek out a Pharisee (or rabbi) at around age 15. If they couldn't find a rabbi to study with (which would have been very common for males living out in the countryside of Galilee), then they would have entered the workforce as apprentices usually under their fathers. We know from historical Roman record that rabbis usually started taking students around the age of 30 (remember Jesus is a rabbi and it is from this historical knowledge that we think Jesus started his ministry at age 30). Thus, all of these historical elements really point to the fact that all of the disciples of Jesus (other than Peter) were middle age teenagers.

-So when our gospel passage starts off this way: "James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came forward to him (Jesus) and said to him, 'Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you.'" I can definitely hear my own 15 year old self saying "shot-gun" in this.

-Now, it's especially easy for us to beat up the disciples, especially when we are in the Gospel. The Gospel of Mark more than any of the other gospels, has the most negative view of the disciples. They never seem to get it. Before this story today, Jesus has what is referred to as his "third passion prediction" where he says: "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; they will mock him, and spit upon him, and flog him, and kill him; and after three days he will rise again." For the disciples, they had no real idea how to connect with this. In their minds, Jesus was going to go fight it out with Rome, take over Jerusalem, and form a new kingdom to rule forever (and they were the ones who were going to witness it all!). Yes, in their minds, they were going to be Jesus' "second lieutenants", helping to rule and control this new kingdom that Jesus was going to install. Clearly, James and John's "calling out shot-gun" here is ill-informed.

-However, even though this is where they are coming from, I want to ask the question: do we put down the disciples for their naivety too easily?

-For myself, all you need to do is put a "dear God" instead of "teacher" and then an "amen" at the end so it sounds like: "Dear God, I want you to do for

me whatever I ask of you. Amen". You can now get a gist of most of the prayers I pray to God. Maybe some of you can relate.

-That aside, here is what I think the brilliance of Jesus' answer. He turns it away from himself. He doesn't just say: NO! You aren't big enough for the airbag so you can't sit in the front seat with me. Instead, he says something to the effect of: actually, I'm not the one driving this car. God is. So, the front seat isn't mine to give. Oh by the way, sitting in the front seat isn't what you think it is.

-I was taking a class in seminary on youth education and the professor, a former youth director, had an interesting image which illuminated the purpose of a youth director. She drew a cross on the board and then explained: "a youth director's job is to make as much noise, hand waving gestures, attention grabbing calls as they can. Once the youth turns to look, it is then the youth director's job to duck and get out of the way so what the youth really sees is God and the cross." Jesus, I believe, is modeling this to a tee. He's getting out of the way and pointing to God while saying: this is what following God's realm means. Power and leadership is more about "getting out of the way" than it is about "lauding over."

-But, even if Jesus' disciples don't get this really. Even if they have a completely different idea of what Jesus and God are up to. Let me ask this: Is James and John's coming forward and asking this question to Jesus wrong? Can we learn something here, not from the disciples question necessarily, but from their courage to step out that is incredibly important? Stephen Chapman, who teaches at Duke Divinity School and writes for the magazine *Christian Century* writes: "Maybe the greater sin in the seminary and the church is not misplaced ambition but complacency and lack of ambition altogether. Where ambition exists, it can be redirected and purified. But where it is entirely absent, mediocrity takes hold, the status quo hardens, and professors and committees debate endlessly about methodology and procedure. Yes, it is too easy to demonize James and John here, for their act of stepping forward matters more to Jesus than their immediate reasons for doing so."

-Can we as a church maybe learn something from these two teenagers? Maybe we don't have it all right or understand it perfectly. Maybe we say something wrong or even offend someone we weren't intending to offend. But all of that, as Jesus models here for us, is OK. Infact, dare I say encouraged?

-Do we have it all together in stepping out on issues of importance like climate change, racism, woman's rights, and mental health? Does our church have it all together in teaching our kids at Bonner School or Boys and Girls Club? Absolutely not. Sometimes it takes moving out of the backseat however imperfectly in order to preach the radical love of Christ. That's what it takes sometimes even when we don't realize it.

-So, I want to thank our beloved teenager disciples who don't get it. May they be an inspiration to us in stepping out, saying something bold, and loving to the best of our ability in the name of Jesus the Christ. Amen.