

Dodging a Bullet, Catching a Spear

[Text - Mark 10:35-45]

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October 21, 2018

There are times when Jesus' disciples seem completely clueless. Maybe that's why I can relate to them so well! Jesus tells them, in no uncertain terms, that he is not going to Jerusalem to receive acclamation as a conquering Messiah, but to face condemnation from those who reject his message of Divine love and inclusion. Nevertheless, the disciples continue to fixate on the possibility of gaining personal power, fame, or fortune from their close connection with Jesus. They're beginning to recognize that Jesus may be the long-awaited Messiah, but their understanding of what that actually means is completely upside-down. Like many people in First-Century Israel, they envision a Messiah who will sweep-into Jerusalem and drive-out those wicked Roman oppressors. Yet Jesus' understanding of the role of Messiah is totally different. He has not come to lead a military revolution. He has come to proclaim a revolutionary message of compassion and inclusion, justice and peace for *all* people. Jesus' ultimate mission isn't to restore the sovereign nation of Israel; but rather to usher in the Divine Realm of Universal Love.

As the Messiah - as the Divinely Anointed One - Jesus chooses the path of self-giving love, as the way to transform this troubled world. Taking his disciples aside, Jesus says, "You know that among the Gentiles [the non-believers] those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their 'great ones' are tyrants over them. But it is not to be so among you. For whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant; and whoever wishes to be first among you must be a servant of all." Naturally, this upside-down approach to leadership seems a bit strange and foolish to Jesus' first followers; just as it can seem a bit foreign and flawed to many of us today.

Within our culture, and sometimes even within our churches, self-serving ambition is both encouraged and rewarded. The American Dream is to get ahead - to climb the ladder of success - financially, socially, politically, materially. Yet how different that is from Jesus' Dream. Jesus envisions living his life in a way that will lift-up the lives of others. He aspires to give of himself for the *sake* of others. His deepest desire is to use his life, and to give his all, in loving service to *all* people. And he doesn't do it for the glory or praise; he does it because he truly believes that it is the right and good and God-like thing to do! So rather than give-in to the demand of the religious leaders - that he abandon his message of extravagantly inclusive love - Jesus chooses to stand firm with society's oppressed and outcast. He is willing to take whatever fallout that comes from that choice. He is even willing to endure a totally undeserved and agonizing death upon a cross. Yet from that cross, Jesus still speaks words of forgiveness and love, even to those who put him there! Even in his *dying*, Jesus continues to raise-up the lives of people who appear hopelessly lost or horribly damaged. And through his rising again, Jesus shows us that even the worst circumstances imaginable can be redeemed by the power of Divine Love.

Think for a moment about the social status of the first person Jesus welcomes into the Divine Realm. It isn't James or John; it isn't some renowned religious or world leader. Jesus says "Today you will be with me in Paradise" to a condemned criminal who is being executed beside him - *literally* positioned at his right or left hand! It seems that James and John dodge a bullet [or at least a Centurion's spear] when Jesus doesn't simply grant their request to be beside him when he "enters his glory"! They have no idea what they're really asking for, in their campaign to be "first and foremost!" Fortunately for you and me, our historical perspective helps us better understand the inverse order within the Divine Community that Jesus envisions.

In Jesus Christ, you and I have a perfect example of a life fully committed to serving others - especially those vulnerable people who are lowest and last in eyes of society. And while Jesus' Way isn't an easy path to follow, it is infinitely better than the cold, calculating and competitive way of this world. The significant difference, is that following the way of Jesus Christ brings about tremendous blessings for *all* people - those who are served, as well as those who serve! Our willingness to share our resources, rather than selfishly stockpiling them, reveals the reality of a Divine Abundance - where there is plenty for everyone, when all are willing to share! And as Jesus faithfully demonstrates, even laying down one's life for the sake of others, can bring-forth a regeneration of Life throughout the world!

In the Divine Realm that Jesus Christ reveals, the surprising reversals are absolutely mind-blowing! The little and the lowly, become the greatest and most highly exalted! Giving and serving, truly *are* their own reward! Welcoming the scorned outsider, is the inside-track to encountering the Sacred Holy One! And the greatest surprise of all, is that our dying is not a failed ending, but a fantastic new beginning! When you and I learn to trust that, then the way we live in the here-and-now will truly be fearless and free, gracious and giving. There will be no need to be concerned about who "wins" this world's highest honors or greatest positions, because all of Creation will share in the Light and Love of our One Eternal Source.

Or to paraphrase the teaching of Jesus "When each person is willing to be a servant to the other, then the blessings of Life will flow freely for all!"