

Proper 24 B
Mark 10:35-45
October 17, 2021

“Uncomfortable Gospel”
Rev. Dr. Brandon S. Perrine

James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came forward to him and said to him, ‘Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you.’ And he said to them, ‘What is it you want me to do for you?’ And they said to him, ‘Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory.’ But Jesus said to them, ‘You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?’ They replied, ‘We are able.’ Then Jesus said to them, ‘The cup that I drink you will drink; and with the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized; but to sit at my right hand or at my left is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared.’

When the ten heard this, they began to be angry with James and John. So Jesus called them and said to them, ‘You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.’

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In her book, *Daring Greatly*, sociologist Brené Brown describes vulnerability as “uncertainty, risk, and emotional exposure.”¹ If I’m completely honest with you, preachers don’t usually like to be vulnerable.

¹ Brené Brown. *Daring Greatly*. New York: Penguin Random House, 2012.

I don't like to feel vulnerable. It makes me squirm a bit, feel hot around the collar, feel uneasy and exposed. It makes me uncomfortable, but, according to Brown, it's also "the birthplace of love, belonging, joy, courage, empathy, and creativity. It is the source of hope, empathy, accountability, and authenticity." Vulnerability is vital for real, authentic relationships. But it makes me uncomfortable. What makes you uncomfortable? Think about it for a moment. What makes you squirm, makes you sweat, releases a flutter of butterflies in your stomach? What makes you uncomfortable?

The truth is, there are lots and lots of things that can make us feel uncomfortable. One online list of the top ten most uncomfortable situations offers the following: forgetting someone's name; making small talk and dealing with awkward silences; going on a first date; confronting a coworker; talking to kids about sensitive topics; talking about taboo subjects like money, religion, or politics; owning up to a mistake; the human body and its various functions; helping someone through their illness or grief; and finally, people who quite simply make us feel uncomfortable.² I think this is a pretty good list, though you may have come up with some other things that would make your top ten.

I'm going to go out on a limb here, but I'm guessing that few of us would list the gospel among the top ten things that makes us feel uncomfortable. We probably wouldn't list Jesus among them either. I could be wrong, but typically the gospel and Jesus don't make us feel uncomfortable—at least not in our 21st century American context. For us, the gospel is good news, pure and simple, and Jesus is the bearer of that good news. What could possibly be uncomfortable about that? I will return to that question in a few moments, but first I want to take a closer look at our text for today from Mark's gospel. This text makes me very uncomfortable. In fact, it makes me cringe.

² Melanie Pinola. "10 Awkward Situations Everyone Has," Lifehacker.com, May 10, 2021, <https://lifehacker.com/top-10-uncomfortable-situations-and-how-to-deal-with-th-1689899501>.

First, James and John try and pull one over on Jesus by asking him to say ‘yes’ before they’ve even made their request. I did that with my parents when I was 7. These guys are in their 30s and have been with Jesus for three years. Did they really think that was going to work?!

Jesus humors them. “What is it you want me to do for you?” he asks. Then the hammer falls, “Give us the places of greatest honor and power and privilege when you come to glory.” Talk about uncomfortable! These guys were so dense! They just didn’t get it—didn’t get him or his message or what was about to happen when they arrived in Jerusalem for that fateful Passover celebration, despite being told three different times what awaited Jesus there. What honor and power and privilege could they really hope to gain?

But he didn’t get angry. He kept his cool. “You don’t know what you’re asking,” he said. “Can you share the cup that I have to drink or be baptized in the baptism that awaits me?” “We can,” they replied. Again, super uncomfortable. The Jesus of Mark’s gospel seems to have known that he would share the cup at the Last Supper and then be offered a cup of sour wine on the cross. Did they really want to share that? The Jesus of Mark’s gospel seems to have known that he would be baptized, not just in the waters of the Jordan River, but into the depths of human experience in death. Did they really want to share that?

The Jesus of Mark’s gospel seems to have known that the places on his right and on his left would be occupied by two thieves paying for their crimes. He told James and John that indeed they would share his cup and his baptism, but that the places on his right and left were reserved for someone else. And then the scene becomes even more uncomfortable as the other disciples overhear James and John trying to get a corner on the power market in Jesus’ coming realm. And then Jesus says something

that has made people uncomfortable for 2000 years and still makes me squirm today: “Whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all.”

That’s just not how the world works, is it? Our great ones command respect. They rise to power on the backs of lesser women and men. And their egos are stoked and their power is reinforced by those of us they claim to serve. That’s how it works, right? They would never dream of being a servant or a slave to anyone!

Jesus’ words are supposed to make us uncomfortable. The gospel is supposed to make us uncomfortable because Jesus envisioned a world where power was flipped upside down and greatness was measured by service. That is the kingdom of God. That is the gospel.

But, as I mentioned before, the gospel and Jesus don’t usually make us feel uncomfortable. Union Seminary professor emeritus Dr. Lamar Williamson, Jr.,

reads a challenge in this text to our modern (or post-modern) ‘complacency and apathy’ as we hear in the gospel a ‘no-risk offer’ that helps us to stay on the straight and narrow. There's more to it than that, he writes, more than just getting our lives together, and may even be ‘disruptive’ at times, requiring ‘a costly pouring out of one’s life for another, whether it be an aging parent, a difficult spouse, a special child, another member of the Christian fellowship who has unusual needs, or any person whose situation elicits neighborly service at personal cost.’³

³ Kathryn Matthews. Ucc.org, October 21, 2018, http://www.ucc.org/worship_samuel_sermon_seeds_october_21_2018.

It may also require confronting institutions, traditions, and power structures that perpetuate injustice and inequality. It may require putting on an apron, picking up a tray, and serving others. Does that sound comfortable?

The truth is, you at New England Congregational Church are not entirely unfamiliar with the uncomfortable gospel of Jesus. During his long tenure with you, the Rev. Gary McCann stretched the barrier of comfortability and worked alongside you as you put on the apron of service to this community's hungry and homeless and aided in the formation of Hased House and the Interfaith Food Pantry; as you advocated for a pride parade here in Aurora and honoring and celebrating of all identities and all loving relationships; as you struggled through the aftermath of George Floyd's murder and began uncomfortable conversations about race and privilege. You are not unfamiliar with the uncomfortable gospel for that is the very nature of Jesus' good news. And it will push us and stretch us and challenge us again, and again, and again.

In our culture, though, the gospel is often misconstrued to be all about eternal life in some other place. Jesus is understood to be an easy answer to nearly any problem—a friend for all times and places, a personal guru getting us through life's challenges, a “get-in-to-heaven-free” card that everyone is prequalified for. And those things may be true and those things are certainly comfortable. But, the Jesus of the Bible also calls us to an uncomfortable gospel where the realm of heaven is breaking into the world—into the here and now—and women and men committed to Jesus' way challenge inequality and injustice, pour themselves out in loving care for one another, and put on the apron and pick up the tray to serve others. That, Jesus says, is what true greatness looks like.

I wonder, what uncomfortable place might the gospel be leading New England Congregational Church into now? As we consider our personal

responses to that question, may we remember that we cannot go where God is not. May that comfort and empower us as we continue to take up the uncomfortable gospel of Jesus for the sake of our world. Amen.

BENEDICTION

This service is ending, but our service to one another, to neighbors and strangers, to the earth itself, is just beginning. As we follow Jesus into the uncomfortable work of the gospel, may God bless you and keep you. May God's face Shine on you and be gracious to you. May God look upon you with love and grant you peace, this day and always. Amen.