

“Shaky Servants of the Lord”

“For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.”

A “probationary period” is a time that many employers utilize to evaluate whether a new employee is a proper fit for the job. Employers can terminate the employee during this period without providing any notice or pay in lieu. It generally runs for three months but can last longer. It offers both the employer and employee the opportunity to see how well a new hire fits into the position, whether to keep them on permanently or to look for someone else.

Judging by what we have seen of the performance of the disciples in the gospels, if Jesus had invoked a probationary period when he invited these persons to become his followers, he might have terminated them, because in many ways they do not appear to be a proper fit for the job. This can be seen most clearly in the events that surround Jesus’ three passion predictions in Mark:

- After Peter had confessed that Jesus is “the Messiah,” (8:29), our Lord *“began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again.”* (8:31). But Peter finds this completely unacceptable; *“Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him”* (8:32). Jesus, in turn, rebukes his disciple for taking the place of Satan in seeking to derail Jesus from his mission and purpose, as Peter has completely misunderstood what it means for Jesus to be the Messiah of God: *“Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.”* (8:33).
- After Jesus’ second passion prediction, where he teaches his disciples that *“the Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him, and three days after being killed, he will rise again”* (9:31), the disciples’ initial reaction is that *“they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him”* (9:32), followed by an argument about who among them was the “greatest” (9:34).
- Jesus’ third passion prediction occurs as he is leading a large group of followers on the road to Jerusalem; Mark reports that this crowd *“were amazed, and those who followed were afraid.”* (10:32). Jesus takes the Twelve

aside and tells them once again the reason for their journey to Jerusalem: “*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 after three days he will rise again.*” (10:33-34). But instead of acknowledging Jesus’ anticipation of suffering and death, James and John approach Jesus with an audacious demand that shows how little they have learned. We would not blame Jesus if he dismissed these clueless disciples and gathered a new crew who were more up to the task.

James and John, the sons of Zebedee, always had a prominent place among the twelve disciples. They were among the first persons who Jesus called as he was walking along the shores of the Sea of Galilee: “*And as he went a little farther, he saw James the son of Zebedee and his brother John, who were in the boat mending the nets. Immediately he called them; and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men and followed him.*” (1:19-20). They were present along with Peter when Jesus led them up the mountain of the Transfiguration, where Jesus’ “*clothes became dazzling white ... and from the cloud there came a voice, ‘This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!’*” (9:3, 7). These brothers must have assumed that they already had a prominent place among Jesus’ chosen followers, but now see an opportunity to guarantee that this prominence will continue when Jesus is “*ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father.*” (Apostles Creed). Despite the previous discussions of discipleship as taking up the cross and of the lowly as heirs of the kingdom of God, James and John ask for the chief positions of honour as Jesus enters his glory. Their request is actually a demand: “*Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you.*” (10:35). This alone could have been grounds for dismissal; what right do students have to make any demands of their teacher, servants to make demands of their master? But Jesus does not react with offense; he simply asks them “*what do you want me to do for you?*” Emboldened by what they see as their golden opportunity, the brothers demand that Jesus “*grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory*” (10:37). In Matthew’s account of this incident, it is the mother of James and John who makes this demand on behalf of her sons (“*Declare that these two sons of mine will sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your kingdom.*” – Matthew 20:21), but Mark puts the words in the brothers’ mouths. Instead of following Jesus in childlike lowliness and trust, “*James and John use a childish stratagem to manipulate him to their own advantage*” (Lamar Williamson, Jr.).

Jesus does not respond to the brothers' outrageous demand with offense, not does he dismiss them for their discipleship. Instead, he responds by telling them that they do not have a clue about what they are demanding: "*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?*" (10:38). James and John may have been thinking of being with Jesus in glory like Moses and Elijah were at the Transfiguration (9:4), but in reality the only ones to be at Jesus' left and right will be the bandits crucified with him when he is "enthroned" as "the king of the Jews" ("*And with him they crucified two bandits, one on his left and one on his right.*" – 15:27). Jesus is asking the brothers if they are really able to follow Jesus on the road upon which they are traveling, sharing in the cup that he drinks and the baptism with which he is baptized; the present tense of "drink" and "baptized" indicate that Jesus has already begun to experience the suffering of the passion. "Cup" (*poterion*) is a metaphor for such participation. In the Old Testament, the word is used metaphorically to refer to divine wrath or punishment ("*For in the hand of the LORD there is a cup with foaming wine, well mixed; he will pour a draught from it, and all the wicked of the earth shall drain it down to the dregs.*" – Psalm 75:8). Jesus will refer to the cup of suffering as he prays in the Garden of Gethsemane hours before his death ("*Abba, Father, for you all things are possible; remove this cup from me; yet, not what I want, but what you want.*" – 14:36). Thus Jesus might be said to drink the "cup" as a sacrificial victim whose death atones for the sinfulness that merited God's wrath ("*For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.*" – 2 Corinthians 5:21). The use of "baptism" (*baptizo*) indicates that it is also a metaphor for suffering ("*Deep calls to deep at the thunder of your cataracts; all your waves and your billows have gone over me.*" – Psalm 42:7). "*Jesus will be enthroned as king, but his throne will be a cross and his crown one of thorns.*" (Williamson).

James and John are asked if they can accept the same king of suffering that Jesus now faces. They reply immediately that "*we are able,*" indicating that they do not understand how Jesus is using these metaphors. Jesus predicts that they will share his suffering, that "*the cup that I drink you will drink; and with the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized*" (10:39). The Acts of the Apostles reports that James was martyred in Jerusalem by Herod Agrippa: "*He had James, the brother of John, killed with the sword*" (Acts 12:2); John may have survived his brother, but would have experienced the trials and persecutions that all early Christians endured. But even though they would participate in Jesus' suffering as his disciples, Jesus does not determine that positions people will have in the Kingdom: "*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” (10:40). God is the one who determines who will share Jesus’ glory.

Since greatness was a topic of contention among the Twelve (*“they had argued with each other about who was the greatest”* – 9:34), the other disciples become angry with James and John when they hear about their intentions. The disciples’ anger may masquerade as moral indignation at James’ and John’s ambition, but the picture of the disciples throughout Mark leads the reader to suspect that the other ten are angry because they want these places for themselves. While this might have been the perfect opportunity for Jesus to invoke a clause from a “probationary period” and dismiss this group of disciples who do not seem up to the task, Jesus chooses to use this occasion as a teaching moment, with a series of sayings about authority and discipleship that make the rejection of power and status in the new community clear:

- “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.” – 10:42-45.

Jesus offers a contrast between the kingdoms of the world and the kingdom of God that he has come to proclaim. He refers to those who are regarded as rulers in the pagan world of the Romans (*“the Gentiles”*) as tyrants who “lord it over” their subjects; *“their great ones exercise authority as tyrants, an authority that stands in contrast to the edifying and restorative authority displayed by Jesus”* (Mark Hoffman). Jesus’ displays of authority have already astounded those who had experienced it (*“They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes”* – 1:22); but the authority that Jesus possesses is radically different from the authority that is wielded by the kingdoms and empires of this world. Although Jesus possesses the fullness of God’s power and authority (*“I believe that Jesus Christ, true God, begotten of the Father in eternity ...”* – *Small Catechism*), Jesus chooses to use this authority not for his own selfish needs and desires but for the purpose for which the Lord intended it to be used:

- “... who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled

himself and became obedient to the point of death – even death on a cross.” – Philippians 2:6-8.

Once again, Jesus tries to redefine what it means to be first and great. He had previously taught his followers that “*whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all*” (9:35) and demonstrates what it looks like in God’s dominion as he welcomes children while proclaiming that “*whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.*” (9:37). The Son of Man is the one who has come to serve – not the glory that the disciples had in mind. Jesus is the one who has come “*not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many*” (10:45); which distinguishes Jesus’ death from those who will be martyred for their witness to the Gospel. The disciples will share Jesus’ suffering but do not offer their lives as a sacrifice for the sins of others. “Ransom” comes from a world in which it was possible to buy the freedom of prisoners of war, slaves, or condemned criminals. The act of setting a person free in such a way was called “redemption,” and is the foundation of Jesus’ identity as Redeemer of a fallen humanity:

- “You know that you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your ancestors, not with perishable things like silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Jesus, like that of a lamb without defect or blemish.” – 1 Peter 1:18-19.
- “He has redeemed me, a lost and condemned human being. He has purchased and freed me from all sins, from death, and from the power of the devil, not with gold or silver but with his holy, precious blood and his innocent suffering and death.” – Small Catechism.

True greatness comes not in being served but others but by serving in the name of the one who came to be served, who gave his disciples an example of what it means to “*love one another as I have loved you*” (John 15:12). When Jesus gives his life as a ransom, “*he frees us not to become great as the world understands greatness, but to serve others as slaves of Christ*” (Hoffman). He has freed us from all that would enslave us and separate us from God’s love “*in order that I may belong to him, live under him in his kingdom, and serve him in eternal righteousness, innocence, and blessedness, just as he is risen from the dead and lives and rules in eternity. This is most certainly true.*” (Small Catechism). All who are called to be disciples of Christ “*are what he has made us to be, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.*” (Ephesians 2:10).

Jesus does not gather the disciples for the purpose of terminating them from what may have been a “probationary period.” While Jesus does not excuse the disciples for their misunderstanding of greatness in God’s Kingdom, neither does he reject them as unworthy. Jesus invites these shaky servants of the Lord to be like him; if the Lord Jesus was a servant, how much more ought his disciples to be servants. Jesus does not call perfect human beings, those without defect or flaw, to be his followers; in fact, again and again the Gospels present the disciples as a very flawed, imperfect group of human beings. These same vain, arrogant, and clueless followers will soon be those who betray, deny, and abandon our Lord at the hour of his passion and death; yet they will be the same people who he will entrust with his message, who will be commissioned to *“be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”* (Acts 1:8). There is no “probationary period” following Baptism, when we are *“reborn children of God and made members of the church which is the body of Christ”* (ELW Holy Baptism). Jesus calls each of us *“just as I am, poor, wretched, blind; sight, riches, healing of the mind, yea, all I need in thee I find, O Lamb of God, I come, I come.”* We are the flawed followers of our Lord, the shaky servants of our Saviour, those who *“have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us.”* (2 Corinthians 4:7). God continues to entrust this mission to the flawed followers and shaky servants of every generation; even though we frequently stumble and fall, God does not abandon us or dismiss us, because God continues to love his children and calls us to be the church that will continue to necessary mission begun by the first apostles were *“called to pour out their lives for others as Jesus did”* (Williamson).

- “Christianity does have a mission to the world, and that mission is the most basic reason for the existence of the church ... it is ‘sent out’ (that is what the word *apostolic* means), usually against its will, by the God who has called it into being, because of love for the world.” – Douglas John Hall.

Yes, we continue to be flawed followers and shaky servants of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ; but Jesus continues to call us, empower us, and send us forth to bear the love of Jesus to others. Yes, we will stumble and fail; but God will not reject us or dismiss us but continues to forgive us and renew us so that we can be the people who will share the love of Jesus and follow our Lord’s example to be servants of one another – as flawed and shaky as that service may be!

Amen.