

Was MLK Great?
Mark10:35-45 (17Oct21)

I want to start with a clarification on this Bible reading. As you may expect from me, the clarification actually makes it more confusing to start.

Let's begin with the word "ransom," that Jesus gave his life as a ransom for many. Some folks grab ahold of that verse to say that Jesus died to pay the price of your sins, sort of like bail or a get out of hell free card. That reads a lot into it and doesn't really fit with the surroundings. So let's be cautious.

The word for ransom in the original Greek is *lutron*. If it sounds like "latrine," a couple times in the Greek rendering of the Old Testament, a version of this word is translated as latrine, so I'm pretty sure they share some sort of base meaning. For ransom, the root relates to setting loose, releasing, freeing. You can try to figure how that might relate to a latrine, but we'll continue on with ransom for now.

One of the main ways this word was used in the Bible was for freeing from bondage or captivity. If latrine wasn't enough of a trigger word, I'll caution that we're going to be dealing with a word that brings up brutal images from our history; most specifically the word ransom was about freeing a slave.

Now, we can envision what it is to free slaves. In our likely conception, it involved a massive deadly Civil War, incremental achievements and social movements, and more than 160 years of ensuing efforts in realizing that freedom.

In the Gospel reading, Jesus says his life does it for you. It's shocking that Jesus declares he has come to set your life free from being enslaved.

The confusing part I mentioned to start is that in the verse right before this, Jesus encourages you to *become* a slave, enslaved and willing to serve all. I hope we can conceive of that without the aspects we'd usually associate with slavery's oppressions, and instead regard it as beloved dedication, giving yourself to others.

At any rate, Jesus is not likely first telling you to become a slave only in the very next verse to say you're free from *that* particular enslavement.

So he's not freeing you from loving others. It's not, as we said, paying off sins, especially for some nebulous divine recordbook.

Instead, I suggest that the liberation and redemption Jesus gives relates exactly to the theme of the rest of the passage. It began with the putzy Zebedee boys trying to ask for special bonus favors from Jesus, who responds by repeating that striving for greatness isn't what he's about; it's what others do, seeking power over, moving up in hierarchy. But among you, Jesus says, it's not that way. Or it shouldn't be.

Just before this, for the third time Jesus said that his mission will lead him toward confrontation with authorities who will torture and kill him. The brothers' follow-up question, then, is the opposite of going with Jesus into those struggles. Their delusions of grandeur meant they hadn't heard Jesus at all, just as the disciples completely missed it the other two times he raised the topic. Maybe they plain don't want to hear.

I don't think we want to hear it, either.

With this passage, Martin Luther King gave a sermon called the Drum Major Instinct, his last Sunday sermon, two months before his assassination. He picks up on the disciples wanting to be great and to be in charge, and turns it to a positive vision, reordering our priorities. When Jesus says the greatest is a servant

That's a new definition of greatness...[It] means that everybody can be great, because everybody can serve. You don't have to have a college degree to serve. You don't have to make your subject and your verb agree to serve. You don't have to know about Plato and Aristotle to serve. You don't have to know Einstein's theory of relativity to serve. You don't have to know the second theory of thermodynamics in physics to serve.*

We take Dr. King's point, and there's something charming about it.

But I'm not sure it hits home among us. We're people who are pretty happy to know a thing or two

* references in *Testament of Hope*, p263-66

about both science and liberal arts. We may be insistent on speaking proper English. We are predominantly glad to benefit from having gone to college—and often far beyond—or are students striving hard to make it *to* a good college.

We are people who count our achievements and successes in moving up the ladder, who take pride in our efforts. Roger Pettersen directly admitted this week that this is just what his career trained him for and compelled him toward, to do what others couldn't do and get what others weren't getting.

Even in volunteering, we want to be recognized and complimented for our efforts of being so caring for others, adding up totals of our goodness. It's a strange reality of churches that we want to be able to serve and don't want to be the ones in need of helping service. We prefer striving for greatness.

Dr. King also indicted the career-driven self-importance, where "because [one] has some training, he's a little better than that person who doesn't have it," and further includes economic security, superior sense of skin color, and even nations wanting to be first, with our own nation the supreme culprit, saying we engage in "senseless, unjust wars" and "won't stop it because of our pride, and our arrogance as a nation."

You might see that this pursuit of greatness stretches throughout our personal and corporate lives. It's how we frame most all of our existence, in trying to come out on top. It's an insidious trap for thinking you've won. At least as captivating and confining is the constant catchup because you feel you're losing, needing to be more successful in these innumerable ways, that you haven't done or become enough.

Either way, we don't want to hear Jesus against it, upsetting our life's goals.

Yet with this constant striving, your enslaved efforts, seemingly unable to escape trying to be better, Jesus came to set you free, to release you, to liberate you from the putzy pursuit of greatness. You may want to be the best, but Jesus wants you to be you. So he ransoms you for this alternate way of living, with his life as the proof. He's not a status to work up to. Dr. King reminds us Jesus was

abandoned by his friends, executed as a criminal, buried in a borrowed tomb without a single possession, and yet is called King of Kings and Lord of Lords. So this is the one who is your model, your goal, the shape of life itself. That means all other efforts you keep trying to attain aren't worth a minute of your time or a smidgeon of your energy.

For all of your striving, you may not want to hear it. But Jesus sets you free.

Hymn: Baptized and Set Free (ELW 453)