

# Bryn Mawr Gives Light 2: *For Service*

By  
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from the pulpit of  
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Psalm 146

<sup>1</sup>Praise the LORD! Praise the LORD, O my soul! <sup>2</sup>I will praise the LORD as long as I live; I will sing praises to my God all my life long. <sup>3</sup>Do not put your trust in princes, in mortals, in whom there is no help. <sup>4</sup>When their breath departs, they return to the earth; on that very day their plans perish. <sup>5</sup>Happy are those whose help is the God of Jacob, whose hope is in the LORD their God, <sup>6</sup>who made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them; who keeps faith forever; <sup>7</sup>who executes justice for the oppressed; who gives food to the hungry. The LORD sets the prisoners free; <sup>8</sup>the LORD opens the eyes of the blind. The LORD lifts up those who are bowed down; the LORD loves the righteous. <sup>9</sup>The LORD watches over the strangers; he upholds the orphan and the widow, but the way of the wicked he brings to ruin. <sup>10</sup>The LORD will reign forever, your God, O Zion, for all generations. Praise the LORD!

## Mark 10:35-45

<sup>35</sup>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.” <sup>36</sup>And he said to them, “What is it you want me to do for you?” <sup>37</sup>And they said to him, “Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory.” <sup>38</sup>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?” <sup>39</sup>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; <sup>40</sup>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.” <sup>41</sup>When the ten heard this, they began to be angry with James and John. <sup>42</sup>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. <sup>43</sup>But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, <sup>44</sup>and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. <sup>45</sup>For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.”

In all of the gospels, but particularly in Mark, we often hear Jesus criticizing his disciples. The disciples seem to fumble around trying to be faithful, but when it comes to the big vision of who Jesus is and where he is leading them, they fall away clueless. Last week we heard Jesus tell them there is nothing a person can do to inherit eternal life. Jesus reminded them it was impossible to do enough good or earn enough credit to get into the kingdom. Life and eternal life are a gift from God. “The first will be last; the last will be first,” Jesus said, urging us to respond to God’s gift of life with generous acts of giving ourselves away in service to others.

In today’s gospel reading, we haven’t moved far down the road to Jerusalem when we arrive at another story about the disciples being earnest but still missing the mark. Today, it’s James and John who start asking questions, who don’t get the point, and push Jesus into delivering another hard saying. You remember James and John. They were the very first fishermen called away from the family business of casting their nets, leaving their father Zebedee and everything else behind to follow Jesus. They have been following Jesus longer than anyone one else, and they still don’t understand where he is going.

Just prior to our reading for today, serving as a bridge - if you will - from last week to this we hear Jesus’ passion prediction. For the third and final time, Jesus has told them the hard truth about where he is headed. To betrayal, arrest, suffering and death, and after three days – resurrection. James and John seem to have tuned out the *betrayal, arrest, suffering and death* part and leap straight to that heavenly vision of Jesus sitting on his throne in glory! “Grant us to sit, one on your right hand and one on your left, in your glory,” they plead with him. They are asking for cabinet positions in the coming kingdom, to be placed in the realm of power and authority, close to the head of the heavenly state, as near to God’s reign as possible.

Again, Jesus corrects them. The only way to get close to God is not through the acquisition of power but through service. Assuming the very

best of intentions, perhaps they want to be able to heal like Jesus, to work miracles like Jesus, to teach and preach like Jesus, but they still cannot grasp the truth of Jesus' suffering and death that is to come.

Will Willimon notes that while it may appear Jesus is awfully hard on them, we might want to cut them some slack. He writes: "Jesus' criticism of them does not mean they are not real disciples. It means they are still on a journey. They are on the way. If they had not committed themselves to follow Jesus if they were not linked to him and to his way, there would be no need for correction. Faith does not mean we have arrived," Willimon concluded, "It means we are on the way."<sup>1</sup>

This story of James and John's request, and Jesus' response, invites us to ponder how God moves freely beyond our safe expectations and conventional definitions. To follow Jesus is to fully embrace his wonder-working power and authority, but never seek to turn his promises and power to our own advantage. We are told if you want to get ahead in the kingdom you have to fall to the end of the line. You have to serve those in need. Here Jesus echoes the message of this morning's Psalm 146: *Do not put your trust in princes, in mortals, in whom there is no help. When their breath departs, they return to the earth and their plans perish. Rather, Happy are those whose help is the God who made heaven and earth, who sets the prisoners free, opens the eyes of the blind, lifts up those bowed down, loves the righteous, watches over the stranger and upholds the poor.*

The ways of God are not our conventional ways of thinking about power, leadership, or worldly measures of success. Jesus counters the common human assumption that greatness comes from status and close association with power by pointing us down a path of service. When James and John try to elbow their way into a distinguished seat beside Jesus in a place of honor, Jesus doesn't cut them off. Instead, he

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<sup>1</sup> Will Willimon, Pulpit Resource, vol. 28, No 4, p. 16.

redirects their inquiry. He says where I am going will require pain, suffering and sacrifice. Are you able? Are you able to follow me there?

John Lewis' memoir, *walking with the Wind*, remembers the remarkable story about "the boy from Troy," as Martin Luther King, Jr. called him. Born in rural Pike County, Alabama, into a large, loving and very poor family, John Lewis recognized from an early age the injustices that kept people, especially African Americans, from fullness of life. Small in stature, unremarkable in his grades at school, John would be the first in his family to go to college. Still in his teens, he desired and was determined to bring about positive change in this country. At only 18, he wrote a letter to Martin Luther King, Jr., whom he did not know personally, but deeply admired, asking for help. His application to transfer to Troy State University was being ignored. To his surprise, King sent him a letter and a bus ticket, inviting him to come to Montgomery for a meeting.

Our Scripture reading finds traction in Lewis' account of that meeting. Ushered into the pastor's office, King rose and smiled at John. "So you're John Lewis," King said, lifting an eyebrow. "The boy from Troy. ... I just want to meet the boy from Troy," King said again. Ralph David Abernathy was also there, asking: "Who is this young man who wants to desegregate Troy State?" John Lewis recalled that moment writing: "I didn't say a word. I was petrified. These men, this moment, this whole thing that was happening, was bigger than life to me. They were checking me out, clearly, and I had no idea what they saw..." "They questioned me about my background, where I came from, how I'd been raised, who had raised me, and I told them. They asked whether I was truly aware of what I was getting into here. They wanted to know how prepared I was for what I would face, and how committed I was to stick it out. If I took this step, they told me, it was imperative that I stay the course. Better not to begin at all, they told me, if there was a chance I might quit. There could be no backing out I understood, I told them. I was ready. "You know, John," said Dr. King, "if you do this, something could happen to you." He seemed genuinely concerned, troubled even.

“It’s not just you who could be hurt, John. Your parents could be harassed. They could lose work, lose their jobs. They could be assaulted. Your home could be attacked. The farm could be burned.”

John listened to them, then nodded. “If you really want to do it,” King said, “we will see you through.” On the face of it, John Lewis must have seemed an unlikely hero or leader of the Civil Rights Movement. But we know how his story goes; the things he was willing to endure, did endure, to change our country’s laws and character for the better. How he served with that rarest of combinations, courage and stubbornness and humility, all of his days – as he had been nurtured by the church. “Are you able?” they asked him. “I am able,” he said. “I will serve.”<sup>2</sup>

Friends, the church is the one institution in all of our lives that will ask us repeatedly to serve, that will repeatedly ask something of us, and give us specific ways to follow Jesus, even to the point of risk and sacrifice. O sure, there are seasons, when it’s a family member or a neighbor or an urgent cause, for which we are called to step up. But it’s the mission of the church, to ask repeatedly: “Are you able to serve? Are you able to serve Jesus Christ by giving of your time and your financial resources? Are you able to help? To teach our children and youth what it means to be disciples of Jesus Christ; To lead the congregation in songs of praise, or usher people into this space of awe and wonder before the unspeakable grace and majesty of God; Are we able? To suffer with one another through the death of loved ones, a long season of illness, the loss of a job, or a marriage, or a hope and dream. Are we able to serve our neighbors in need or to increase our giving to meet growing needs in this community and in the world? Are we able? To encourage the stewardship of the congregation, so that we who have more than we need, can make a difference for those who do not have enough. The church is called to continue asking the question Jesus asked, Are you able to serve?

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<sup>2</sup> John Lewis, *Walking with the Wind*, p. 68-69.

When the Stewardship Committee decided on the theme for this year, Bryn Mawr Gives Light, the first thing that came to mind was the photograph of the new Atrium at dusk, emanating light. Last winter when we partnered with our neighbors to house the Code Blue Shelter, I spent a half-night shift in that Atrium with another volunteer. Many of you have spent many more. So, when the temperature drops below freezing, our handful of homeless neighbors can see the light of our church and know where to enter and find shelter. That is just one example of how you can serve through the ministry of this church. But that image of the Atrium all lit up to make clear our front door for our homeless neighbors, has grown in my imagination to symbolize the Spirit of service that permeates through this congregation. Here is the space, through which we enter, and having been nurtured in the faith, from which we go out to serve, ready to give answer when Jesus asks, Are you able? Are we able to follow Jesus into a world of need shining his light through our bold acts of service?

AMEN.