

Don't Be A Christian
Living In The Modern World
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(Mark 10:35-45 NRSV) 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." {36} And he said to them, "What is it you want me to do for you?" {37} And they said to him, "Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory." {38} 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?" {39} 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; {40} 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." {41} When the ten heard this, they began to be angry with James and John. {42} 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. {43} But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, {44} and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. {45} For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many."

I want to begin this morning by doing something a little different. I need five or six volunteers to come up front this morning.

What I need you to do is join hands and form a circle. That should not be too difficult to do..

You have done a beautiful job creating that circle — but this is the tricky part!

Is that the only kind of circle that you can make?

So if you wouldn't mind — would you make a different kind of circle.

<<KEEP GETTING THEM TO FORM DIFFERENT CIRCLES>>

<<While still holding hands, form an outward-facing circle>>

Now that you are facing outward what is your primary view.

In this kind of a circle, you are facing completely away from each other, full-

face to those outside the circle.

Lets form one more circle — this time I want each of you to stand sideways to the center of the circle. What is your view this time?

Now your vision looks both ways. You can see the person in front of you, but you can also see other members of the circle across from you, as well as having a clear view of people outside the circle.

This is a movement circle, a group of people poised to go somewhere together, with the ability to look in and look out at the same time.

Why is making a "looking out" rather than "looking in" circle such a strange, radical idea for so many of us?

From the time we are little children we are taught that circles face in. Our inability to even conceive of a different kind of circle should help us to commiserate with the disciple's denseness as Jesus tries to communicate a new concept of missionary discipleship to his followers.

Listen to this story:

James and John, Zebedee's sons, came up to him. "Teacher, we have something we want you to do for us."

"What is it? I'll see what I can do."

"Arrange it," they said, "so that we will be awarded the highest places of honor in your glory — one of us at your right, the other at your left."

Jesus said, "You have no idea what you're asking. Are you capable of drinking the cup I drink, of being baptized in the baptism I'm about to be plunged into?"

"Sure," they said. "Why not?"

Jesus said, "Come to think of it, you will drink the cup I drink, and be baptized in my baptism. But as to awarding places of honor, that's not my business. There are other arrangements for that."

When the other ten heard of this conversation, they lost their tempers with James and John. Jesus got them together to settle things down. "You've observed how godless rulers throw their weight around," he said, "and when people get a little power how quickly it goes to their heads. It's not going to be that way with you. Whoever wants to be great

must become a servant. Whoever wants to be first among you must be your slave. That is what the Son of Man has done: He came to serve, not to be served — and then to give away his life in exchange for many who are held hostage."

At first glance that story is kinda funny — I mean it is silly — James and John arguing over heavenly seating arrangements.

We may find James' and John's questions absurdly naive and outrageously ignorant, but these disciples were actually just caught up in making the same old circle.

The Jewish understanding is that the Messiah is to arrive on the last day in glory and power — judging all and ruling all. Not much different from our understanding of the Second Coming of Christ. Those who were faithful and lived righteous lives expected to be rewarded for their service.

This is certainly the vision that James and John are demonstrating in our story this morning. The a great and powerful Messiah would surround himself with great and distinguished disciples — and James and John wanted to make sure that their place was secure.

But Jesus comes and offers a different way.

Jesus preached that it was only through helping others, focusing on the powerless, the hopeless, and the insignificant, that a disciple could be called "great." A truly great disciple, like Jesus himself, would willingly suffer persecutions, expect deceits and disloyalty, and know death might be the only reward for all his or her sacrifices.

Is it surprising that the Disciples wanted to form circles
that they wanted to deal with an understanding of Discipleship that just faced inward?

When we face outward we have to look into the face of others and deal with the frightening possibilities of rejection, abuse, failure, even death. We might even get taken advantage of.

But facing out was the discipleship Jesus preached.

Jesus taught that to give up your life is to save it;
that the first shall be last and the last first.

Those are very different circles.

One of the things that I found most fascinating in Dan Kimball's book: *They*

Like Jesus, but not the Church is that many people today are frustrated with a church that only cares about itself.

They are sick and tired of churches that only look inward — churches that are only concerned with themselves.

But Jesus did not teach upward mobility. Jesus taught outward mobility.

The church (especially the mainline/old-line church) has become much too fixated on how to save itself rather than caring for the world.

This is seen most clearly in the churches lack of concern over environmental missions.

Our lack of concern over the plight of those who live across the street from us.

John Buchanan, Pastor of Second Presbyterian Church in Chicago once shared a powerful story. It illustrates our lack of understanding of our neighbors around us.

The Hyde Park Bank in Chicago came up with a terrific marketing in the mid 1990's. The executives wanted a public relations brochure that would describe the bank's community re-investment program. So, they had an agency create a lively poster to be displayed in the schools, inviting children to submit pictures and essays on the topic, "My Neighborhood." The winning entries would be used in the bank's brochure.

The bank president said, "The responses we received stunned us."

The bank expected "brightly colored, childish drawings of trees and houses, and funny little stories about the postman and the people on the block."

The first essay submitted was by an 8-year-old, Gail Whitmore. Her first sentence indicated that the project was going in a different direction than the one the bank intended.

"In my neighborhood," Gail wrote, "there is a lot of shooting and three people got shot."

"Hello, my name is Charlie. I live in a slum. Some people call it hell on earth and so do I." Charlie is 12.

The pictures are deceptively innocent.

"In colorful pictures of buildings and trees and kids playing, one might see, on closer look, people shooting at each other, or a drug deal ...; two bright suns are shining over a playground with smiling people, one of whom is shooting a gun."

By the time they are 5 years old, the majority of the children of the inner city will have had some personal encounter with handgun violence. Birthdays for these children are noted, not by the phrase "He turned 10," but by "He made 10."

The pictures and essays are published in a fine little book, *My Neighborhood: The Words and Pictures of Inner-City Children* by Linda Waldman. And to read it, I found, is profoundly moving and disturbing but ultimately inspiring, because somehow, in spite of all they have seen and experienced, these kids are full of hope: not despair or cynicism, but hope. Charles Williams who knows that he lives in hell on earth concludes his essay, "People say my area is the worst place on earth, but I'm surviving. I have a roof over my head, a bed to sleep in, a T.V. of my own and a nice family."

That's not in the view of my circle normally. I avoid looking at the problems of crime, poverty, illiteracy and injustice that happen in my own back yard. I would rather focus on the issues that I think are more pressing.

How do we fix the parking lot lights
 What should be our emphasis for lent
 . . . and I could go on and on.

But Jesus says — if we want to be disciples — we must pay attention to those around us.

But the we don't because we don't live in those worlds. We have created a CHRISTIAN BUBBLE.

We live safely within our bubble and try not to pop it.

I never really realized how true that "Christian Bubble" was until we did a **Bring A Friend Campaign** a number of years ago. The object of the campaign was for each of you to bring an unchurched friend with you to church.

The result SHOCKED me!

Any guesses how many friends that we brought that week?

1 — that's right 1

And as I tried to figure out why this failed so miserably — a number of people came up to me and said:

“I don’t have any non-Christian friends”

THAT IS THE CHRISTIAN BUBBLE

That is what I mean when we make the circle inward focused.

Somehow we need to look out beyond ourselves.

We need to put ourselves in places where we can meet people who are non-Christians.

And then we need to share why we believe what we believe — and we can do that because we are all becoming the theologians that God wants us to be.