

**The Nerve!**  
A Sermon for Every Sunday, Pentecost 21B  
*Mark 10:35-45*

In a book called *The Critical Years* Sharon Parks writes about going to Harvard as a new chaplain and ending up at a faculty reception where she felt nervous and out of place. She was sitting in the corner when an older, well-known faculty member came and sat down beside her. He started a conversation and soon they were talking about his son who had just started college in another state. The professor talked about how hard it was for him to let the boy go off to school and how much he worried about him. Parks found herself saying, “Oh, well, don’t worry. Whatever the worst thing is that you’ve imagined might happen to him won’t. It will be something else.” Looking back on it now she says it seemed like a stupid thing to say, but he jumped on it right away. “Good,” he said, “because I’ve already decided what the worst thing would be.” “Oh, really?” Parks answered. “And what is that?” “The worst thing,” the man said, “would be for him to come to the place where it was no longer possible for him to make meaning.”

Parks uses that conversation to launch a long discussion about the ability to make meaning, something she calls “faith.” I talk about this regularly in the new member classes I teach at my church. I tell those new members that we all have some way of making sense of the world we live in, some framework of understanding on which to hang our experience. If we step outside and a bird flies past we say, “Yes, that’s right. Birds fly.” And we hang that experience in its proper place on the framework. But if we step outside and a cat flies past we don’t know what to do. We either 1) reject the experience out of hand (“That didn’t really happen”), 2) invent a sensible explanation (“That cat wasn’t really flying. Someone just threw it across my field of vision”), or 3) reconstruct our framework of understanding to include flying cats. But in

each case our brain works to make sense out of something that appears to be nonsense. It has to. Because when we can no longer make sense of our experience we can no longer function in the world.

When Sharon Parks uses the word “faith” to identify this meaning-making ability she uses it in a broader way than we usually do. She would say that even the atheist has faith, a framework on which to hang his experience. She would only add that in his experience there is no evidence of a good and loving God. In fact, his experience of the world leads him to just the opposite conclusion. “How could a good and loving God could allow all the violence and hatred that exists in the world?” he argues. “How could a good and loving God allow something like the Holocaust?” And because there aren’t really any good answers to that question he rejects the idea of God, and constructs a framework that doesn’t include the supernatural. And for the atheist, at least, it makes a lot more sense to look at the world that way than to imagine a God who won’t rescue his own people from annihilation. A godless world fits his experience; it becomes his “faith.”

Not to say that he’s right about that. There is another way to look at the world and that is the way the Bible looks at it: the Bible presents the world as the gift of an all-powerful and all-loving creator who wanted nothing more than to be in relationship with the people he had made. When they rejected him the first time he decided to start over again. He flooded the world and saved one man who had found favor in his eyes. His hope was that this man would teach his children to love and serve the Lord, and they in turn would teach their children, and so on and so forth until the whole world was filled with good and godly people. It didn’t work. But this time instead of starting over he started with one man among many and promised him an inheritance and an inheritor if he would only stay faithful. He did. And through Abraham came Isaac, and

then Jacob, whose name was later changed to Israel. Through his twelve sons came the twelve tribes of a new nation who were delivered from their slavery in Egypt and brought into the Promised Land. They settled there. They raised crops and reared children. They crowned a king who laid claim to more land. But then the kingdom was divided, and the kings became corrupt, and the Assyrians conquered the north and the Babylonians conquered the south and they were taken into exile so that it looked like all was lost. Until a remnant returned to the land and worked to rebuild Israel and through the years they nourished the hope that one day all would be well again, that a king would take the throne who would restore the nation to its former glory, whose name would be “Messiah.”

That biblical faith is the faith the disciples were living with. That’s the way they made sense of the world. And the reason they were so excited is that they believed Jesus *was* that king. As they followed him around, as they witnessed his mighty works, they became more and more convinced that he was, in fact, the one they had been waiting for all these years. And when Peter came right out and said it—“You are the Messiah!”—Jesus did not deny it. That’s when the disciples began to get really excited. If Jesus was the long-awaited Messiah then all their dreams were about to come true. He would march into the city of Jerusalem and get rid of those meddling Romans. He would drive them out of the country and take his place on the throne of his ancestor David. And then, of course, there would be places of privilege for all those who had stuck with him through his long campaign. There would be thrones to his left and thrones to his right . . .

If this were your framework of understanding, can you see how you would have no place to hang the idea of a crucified Messiah? When Jesus announced that he was going to Jerusalem you would think, “Yes, yes! Jerusalem! The Royal City! Where the throne of David is! Where

the Messiah will begin his reign!” It all makes perfect sense. But when he began to talk about being handed over to the chief priests and scribes, when he began to talk about being condemned to death, when he began to talk about being mocked, and flogged, and killed, well! It was like watching a cat fly past. The disciples had to 1) reject the comment out of hand (“He didn’t really say that”), 2) invent a sensible explanation (“It’s just a figure of speech”), or 3) reconstruct their framework of understanding to include a crucified Messiah, something they just couldn’t do. And so they opted for one of the other explanations and went forward with their assumptions of impending glory.

We need to be careful not to judge them too quickly, or too harshly. It is a difficult thing to alter the framework of your understanding, and it is always a risk: while you are reaching across the empty space to put a new girder in place—with a wrench in one hand and a bolt between your teeth—the whole thing could collapse. And you know what that means, right? The definition of insanity is not trying the same thing over and over again in the hope that you will get a different result, as Albert Einstein once joked. The definition of insanity is the inability to make meaning, a far more serious thing, and without a framework of understanding you can’t do it. You can’t make sense of your world anymore. That’s what this professor was so afraid of in Sharon Parks’ story: that his son would come to the place where it was no longer possible for him to make meaning, that the framework of understanding his father had helped him build through the years would be torn down by those who weren’t nearly so thoughtful or careful. They might put up another, rickety framework in its place, or leave the boy standing in the wreckage of the old one. When you can’t make meaning anymore then every experience is a “flying cat” experience and you just go crazy, you come unglued. Maybe it would be better not to take that risk. Maybe it would be better to just leave things as they are.

It is under those circumstances that James and John come to Jesus just after he has told them for the third time that he is going to suffer and die. “Teacher,” they say, ignoring his last comment. “We want you to do us a favor.”

“What is it?” Jesus asks, his mind on other things.

“When you come into your glory,” they ask, “could we have the thrones on either side of you, the ones on the left and the right?”

And Jesus stops in the road and stares at them. Are they insane? Didn’t he just say he was going to suffer and die in Jerusalem? Haven’t they heard anything? There is a long silence before he answers and when he does he tries another approach.

“Can you drink the cup that I drink? Can you be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?” We know exactly what he means. He’s talking about the cup of suffering. He’s talking about baptism by fire. But James and John don’t seem to have a clue. Or maybe they are just in deep denial.

“Sure,” they say. “No problem.”

And Jesus shakes his head with wonder. And also with sadness. “Oh, you’ll drink the cup all right,” he says. “And you’ll experience the baptism. But as for who gets the thrones on my left and right, well, that’s not for me to say.”

When the other disciples heard about it they were furious. The *nerve* of these two! Asking for the positions of privilege before any of the rest of them had a chance. And when Jesus heard about it he broke up the fight, called them together, and tried to do for them the kindest thing he could do. He tried to reconstruct the framework of their understanding: loosening the bolts, taking down the girders, putting it back together for them in a way that made sense—not in the top-down, me-first way of the world, but in the bottom-up, others-first way of

the Kingdom. “You know,” he said, “that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them.” They nodded their heads. Yes, that’s exactly how it was. And we should pause long enough to nod our heads, too. Because that’s still how it is, and we 21<sup>st</sup> century Americans know that better than most. We recognize the structures of power. They fit neatly into our framework of understanding. “Yes,” we say. “Go on.” “No,” Jesus says. “Stop.” And as he continues to pull down that old framework he says, “It is not to be so among you.” He clears away the wreckage. Sweeps the foundation. And then he begins to put the first girders of a new framework in place. “Whoever wishes to become great among you,” he says, grunting, “must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all.” And then he wipes the sweat from his brow and jerks a thumb back toward himself: “For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.”

Can you see the frightened looks on their faces? As Jesus goes about his work, twisting his wrench, taking down the framework of their old understanding, putting up a new one in its place, it all sounds like loud, clanging madness to them, like lunacy! How can you become great by being a servant? How can you be first by being a slave to all? Why would the Messiah—the King!—want to give up his life? They feel that old framework trembling, threatening to collapse. They take a quick look down from that dizzying height. They fear they will never be able to make sense of the world again. But as they look into Jesus’ eyes they see no madness there. If anything they see the opposite—the kind of clear-eyed sanity that makes them wonder if it is they, and not he, who have gotten it all wrong.

It’s not the nerve of James and John I’m worried about: it’s the nerve of Jesus! Asking us to tear down our old frameworks of understanding. Asking us to put up new ones in their place.

And then there's the matter of my own nerve. I'm not sure I'll be able to do what he asks. But here is the truth: unless we tear down the old frameworks, unless we put up some new ones, we will never be able to make sense of Jesus or this crazy, mixed-up Kingdom he keeps talking about. When I first preached from this passage I preached it with the old framework firmly in place. I ended by saying, "If you want to be great don't grab all the power you can get, serve all the people you can serve!" But do you see how that's just another means to the same selfish ends? Imagine Mother Teresa saying to herself, all those years ago, "I sure would like to win the Nobel Peace Prize. Maybe I'll go down to Calcutta and help out some poor little orphans and some sorry-looking lepers. That ought to do the trick!" You know what we would have said to her if she talked like that? We would have said, "That's crazy...maybe just crazy enough to work!" But that's not what she did. She didn't listen to us; she listened to Jesus. She believed him when he talked about lastness and leastness. She followed the example of one who came not to be served, but to serve. One girder at a time she took down the framework of the world's understanding and put up the framework of the Kingdom's until serving orphans and lepers was the only thing that made sense. When she talked about it she sounded a little bit crazy, but those people who looked into her eyes didn't see madness there. If anything they saw the opposite, they saw the kind of clear-eyed sanity that calls all our previous assumptions about greatness into question.

The nerve of that woman, proving that it can be done!

The nerve of Jesus, asking us to do it!

And now he only wonders if we will have . . .

The nerve.

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