

Predicting the Passion

Mark 10:32-34

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March 18, 2018

Apparently it is a fairly simple process to learn about your ancestry. On one of the sites devoted to discovering your ancestry we are promised that “Your DNA can reveal your ethnic mix and ancestors you never knew you had—places and people deep in your past...try our ancestry link and get a new view into what makes you uniquely you.” That really is amazing, that your DNA can help you discover who is in your family tree and who your ancestors are.

Many people seem to be interested in learning about their ancestry and so they use websites and internet searches and old fashioned genealogical records to trace their origins. For me it sort of fell into my lap. I was doing some preparation for this sermon and lo and behold I found out I have a link to a well-known family from the Bible. I wish I could tell you I dug deep into some ancient historical documents stored in a safe place to protect them from damage, or that some recent biblical discovery disclosed the long hidden secret of how I am related to this well-known family in the Bible, but it wasn't like that at all. I was just reading along in a Bible commentary and there it was, printed on the page of a book that has been published and read for several years now. I don't know how I missed it all these years, but I know now that I have the DNA of a well-known family from the Bible. I have the DNA of Zebedee in my genes.

Here I am claiming to have the DNA of a well-known family in the Bible, and yet when I say Zebedee you might not be familiar with this particular family. But if I tell you just a bit more I am almost certain you will recognize the family to which I have been linked genetically. Zebedee had two sons, and their names were James and John. Yes, that James and John, the fisherman who were called by Jesus in Mark chapter one. “Jesus saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John in a boat, preparing their nets. Without delay he called them, and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men and they followed Jesus.” (Mark 1:19, 20)

That day when James and John, the sons of Zebedee left their father and their boat and followed Jesus, that day was a glorious one for them. They heard Jesus call and they answered the call, swiftly and without hesitation, literally dropping everything to follow him. So to be told I have the DNA of Zebedee in my genes might sound impressive. Well, it turns out having the DNA of Zebedee in my genes is not really something to boast about. When I discovered I have the DNA of Zebedee in my genes I was reading a story about James and John, the sons of Zebedee that was not very flattering.

Mark 10:35-45 records an encounter between Jesus and the sons of Zebedee where they pull him aside and say, “Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask.” They have a favor to ask of Jesus. They don’t want to ask it in front of the other disciples. What they want is to have a place of privilege in the kingdom of heaven. They want to sit on the right and the left hand of Jesus when Jesus reigns in glory. There are twelve disciples, but they want to be numbers one and two, or maybe they would share top billing. Either way, their motives are selfish. The DNA they have in their genes as sons of Zebedee is the DNA of being selfish. And one of the commentators on this passage of scripture had the nerve to tell me that I had the DNA of the sons of Zebedee in my genes. The commentator told me I had the DNA of selfishness in my genes.

Although I didn’t like hearing what the commentator had to say, they were good enough to include others in my gene pool. In fact, the woman who made the statement says, “We (all) have Zebedee DNA in our genes.¹ Claiming we might all be like those grasping sons of Zebedee, the commentator speculates, “We may not be upfront about self-centered yearnings, but many of us spend our lives scheming for those kinds of privileged position... We might not make outlandish requests, but in our hearts we often covet the best of the lot, the top spot, the place of recognition. Indeed, this is part of the human condition.”²

Is it part of the human condition? Do we all have the DNA of Zebedee in our genes? The other disciples certainly exhibit evidence that the DNA of Zebedee is in their genes. When the special request of James and John becomes public, when the others learn of their selfish plan to secure a place of honor and prestige for themselves, the other disciples become indignant. It seems they might have had designs on those very same places of honor for themselves. If it is true of the twelve that they have the DNA of Zebedee in their genes, is it too much to admit that DNA might be in our genes?

When Jesus speaks to his disciples, to James and John and to the rest of the twelve, he makes it clear that the genetic predisposition to selfishness does not fit with life in the kingdom of God. The genetic predisposition to selfishness might indeed be our human condition, and in our world those with authority lord it over others and assert their rights and scramble after greatness and recognition. But Jesus looks at his disciples and says, “Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve...” (Mark 10: 43-45)

¹ David B. Howell, quoting Jana Childers, “Feasting on the Word, Year B, Volume 4, p. 190.

² Howell, p. 190.

What we have before us in the Gospel of Mark is a story where James and John exhibit the DNA of Zebedee in their genes when they ask for a special place of honor. The other disciples fall victim to that same selfish predisposition. After it becomes clear they all have the DNA of Zebedee, Jesus talks to them about the kingdom of God. He talks to them about the DNA of the kingdom of God. If there is any greatness found in the kingdom of God it will be found in having the DNA of a servant.

There is an added piece related to this encounter that sheds light on how imbedded the DNA of Zebedee is in the lives of the disciples. This episode does not begin with James and John asking to have a place of greatness. The selfish request that James and John make comes immediately after Jesus has made a sober announcement. The announcement takes place as Jesus and the disciples are on their way to Jerusalem. The destination matters, for as they travel to Jerusalem Jesus tells his disciples that he will be delivered over to the religious leaders who will condemn him to death and hand him over to the Gentiles. He will then be mocked and spit on, flogged and killed. Three days later he will rise. It is after Jesus tells his disciples that he is going to Jerusalem to face arrest, abuse, and ultimately death that James and John come up and ply him with their selfish request to have special places of honor. The contrast could not be more jarring. Such a small minded request when Jesus has highlighted his future suffering seems to confirm that the DNA of the brothers truly is selfish. And the brothers are not alone. The disciples have that same DNA. And maybe we all do.

If what takes place in Mark 10 as Jesus predicts his suffering followed immediately by the selfish demonstrations of the sons of Zebedee and the whole band of disciples isn't enough to convince us that the DNA of Zebedee is part of our human condition, let me point out one important word, the word *again*. In Mark 10:32 we are told, "Again Jesus took the Twelve aside and told them what was going to happen to him (in Jerusalem)." This was not the first time Jesus told his disciples what would happen to him in Jerusalem. This was not even the second time. This was the third time Jesus told his disciples about his passion, about what would happen to him in Jerusalem.

The first time Jesus predicted his passion was in Mark 8, right after Peter made that dramatic profession of faith, saying to Jesus, "You are the Messiah." No sooner did those words of faith come from the mouth of Peter than Jesus seemed to use those words as a signal it was now time to tell his disciples the full nature of his mission and his ministry. Peter says, "You are the Messiah," and right then Jesus began to teach his disciples that he must suffer many things and be rejected and killed and after three days he would rise. Peter, so quick to name Jesus as Messiah, then overstepped his bounds and rebuked Jesus. It was as if Peter said, "You are the Messiah," and the Messiah is not someone who suffers. The Messiah is a strongman who conquers. But Jesus is crystal clear about who he is, what his kingdom is, and who his disciples will be.

“Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it.” (Mark 8:34, 35)

A second time Jesus told his disciples, “The Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of human beings. They will kill him, and after three days he will rise.” How did the disciples respond this second time they heard Jesus predict his passion? They got into a silly argument as they traveled along, and the argument was about which one of them was the greatest.” That selfish DNA sure shows itself. Jesus says he is going to die and before the words are out of his mouth the disciples are arguing about who is the greatest. They argue about who gets to be first in the kingdom.

Mark tells us that at this point Jesus sat them down and said, “Whoever wants to be first must be the very last, and the servant of all.” (Mark 9:30-35) Then he brings his message to life. He takes a little child and places the child in the center of them all. “Whoever welcomes one of these little children in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me does not welcome me but the one who sent me.” I wonder if the disciples get the point. If you are worried about where you rank in the kingdom, if you spend all your time looking up to see where you rank, you aren’t going to spend much time looking out for others, especially the little ones, the ones on the fringe, the ones who get lost in the crowd. But if you can just get your eyes off yourself and stop worrying about your place in the kingdom, and if you can just welcome one of the least ones, like a little child, you will find you were closer to Jesus than you ever dreamed you could be.

So there are two previous incidents where Jesus predicts his passion. Both times he tells the disciples what awaits him, suffering and death. Both times the disciples get it all wrong. Both times the disciples expose their DNA, thinking only about themselves. Both times Jesus then teaches them about life in the kingdom. Lose your life for my sake and you will find it. If you want to be first be the last, be the servant, welcome the little ones, welcome the last ones, welcome the least ones, welcome the children. After these two previous incidents found in Mark 8 and 9, we come to the passage before us this morning, found in Mark 10, where after the two previous incidents the passage begins with that ominous word *again*. “Again...Jesus took the twelve aside and told them what was going to happen.” Again he predicted his passion. Again he told them about his suffering and death. And unfortunately, again the disciples demonstrate their genetic disposition to selfishness. James and John make their request and the other disciples grumble and complain.

The fact that Jesus predicts his passion three times and all three times the disciples not only miss out on his message but they even act completely the opposite of his message is a strong signal that the DNA in our genes is firmly attached and not easily altered.

The fact that the DNA in our genes is not easily altered brings to mind a story that is in the curriculum we are using with our Confirmation Class. The class has been meeting since January and next Sunday they will meet with the Session and share their statements of faith. Then on Sunday, April 8, the class will lead worship and be received into membership here at Dunn's Corners. I have loved working with the students and I am so grateful for the 18 adults who are serving as mentors to the students.

In one of our lessons we were talking about how Jesus is God incarnate, the Word of God who became flesh and dwelt among us. To help the students get a feel for what it means that Jesus became human, the curriculum told a story about a man who was looking out his window during a snowstorm.

As he looked out the snow turned into a blinding snowstorm. The man sat down to relax before the fire for the evening. Then he heard a loud thump, something hitting against the window. And another thump. He looked outside but couldn't see. So he ventured outside. In the field near his house he saw, of all the strangest things, a flock of geese! They were apparently flying to look for a warmer area down south, but had been caught in the snow storm. The storm had become too blinding and violent for the geese to fly or see their way. They were stranded on his farm, with no food or shelter, unable to do more than flutter their wings and fly in aimless circles.

He had compassion for them and wanted to help them. He thought to himself, "The barn would be a great place for them to stay! It's warm and safe; surely they could spend the night and wait out the storm"

Well, as I am reading this story to our youth, this wonderful group of 18 middle school and high school students, the nicest feeling came over me. The first time I heard this story I was commuting to seminary in California, driving 100 miles from Sacramento to San Francisco. I was 24 years old. I had an old radio, just an AM station. When I got near San Francisco I could pick up this station that played oldies, which I absolutely love. And not only did the station play music I love, but the morning DJ was an outrageous character who made the morning drive zip by with his off the wall antics. His name was Gene Nelson, but he called himself, "The Emperor." The Emperor was crude, sarcastic, profane, and usually pretty funny. If the Emperor was anything, he was irreverent. This made it all the more surprising when one December morning the Emperor took a break from his sarcasm, from his crude humor, from his insults and shared a story. It was the very same story about the flock of geese that I read to our confirmation class. The man saw the plight of the geese and thought if he could just get them to my barn they would be safe. Imagine me listening to the Emperor on a cold and foggy morning as I drove into San Francisco when I was just 24 years old. The Emperor continued the story.

So the man opened the barn doors for geese. He waited, watching them, hoping they would notice the open barn and go inside. But they didn't notice the barn or realize what it could mean for them. He moved closer toward them to get their attention, but they just moved away from him out of fear. He went into the house and came back out with some bread, broke it up, and made a bread trail to the barn. They still didn't catch on. Starting to get frustrated, he went over and tried to shoo them toward the barn. They panicked and scattered into every direction except toward the barn.

Nothing he did could get them to go onto the barn where there was warmth, safety and shelter. Feeling totally frustrated, he exclaimed, "Why don't they follow me? Can't they see this is the only place where they can survive the storm?"

How can I possibly get them into the one place to save them?" He thought for a moment and realized that they just wouldn't follow a human. He said to himself, "How can I possibly save them? The only way would be for me to become like those geese. If only I could become one of them! Then I could save them! Then they would follow me and I would lead them to safety."

With that, the Emperor was done with the tender tone. He was off to his usual antics. But I sat behind my wheel stunned. I had just heard a parable about the birth of Christ on a radio station broadcasting all over northern California. If I became one of them, I could save them. They would all follow me to safety. Without ever saying the actual words, Gene Nelson, the Emperor of San Francisco morning radio, had invited that whole city by the bay to come to Jesus, for in Jesus God had become a human being like us, so that he could lead us to safety.

My heart was filled with joy on that day more than 30 years ago, and my heart was filled with joy a few weeks ago as I was able to use our curriculum and share the story of the geese with our young people. The story of the geese invites us to consider what an amazing thing it is that God became one of us.

As much as I love the story of the man and the geese, I hope you recognize it does not tell the whole story about Jesus. What we have encountered this morning, when Jesus again told his disciples, told them for the third time, when he predicted his passion and they did not follow him, we realize it was not enough for Jesus to come and be with us and show us the way. There is some DNA in us that keeps us from following Jesus, even though he is the Son of God.

But it turns out God understood that it would take more than simply coming to this earth. Jesus understood. Because of our selfish DNA, because we have the DNA of the sons of Zebedee, who snuck around trying to secure a special place where they could be just a little better than the others, Jesus understood it would take more than his coming

to earth and calling people to follow him. It would take his death. Somehow his death on the cross would transform our DNA. It is a mystery that always remains beyond our ability to fully comprehend or understand why Jesus had to die, but he was convinced of it. He told his disciples about it three times. He predicted his passion.

When Jesus speaks of his suffering and death this third time, he points to a purpose in his passion that holds out hope for us who find ourselves struggling because we have the DNA of Zebedee in our genes. Jesus ends this passage by telling us about his DNA. He says, “The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve.” He demonstrates that in all he does. He demonstrates that most clearly when he dies for all of us. He lays down his life for us. The DNA of Jesus was to be a servant.

The message of hope he gives on this Sunday when he once again predicts his passion is that he will give his life as a ransom. (Mark 10:45) When Jesus dies and then rises again, a powerful transformation takes place. His death is a ransom and the final result is that a bunch of people who once looked at themselves with despair and said, “We have the DNA of Zebedee,” are able to celebrate and rejoice in knowing that old DNA is defeated. That old DNA is replaced. Our lives have been ransomed at a great cost and there is new creation. The old is gone. Behold, the new has come.

Someone who understood the great power of transformation wrote, “I have been crucified with Christ and it is no longer I who live...Christ lives in me.” People who have found new DNA in Jesus grab hold of words like this: “Your attitude should be the same as Christ Jesus, who being in very nature God did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but he made himself nothing. He took the very nature of a servant.”

Today we have on full display the DNA of Zebedee. We have two brothers showing what a hopeless life we have if we are stuck in our human condition of grasping after greatness. Thankfully that is not all we have. We have Jesus. We have God’s Beloved Son. Jesus is predicting his own passion, his own suffering and his own death. May we follow him every step of his difficult journey to Jerusalem, for as we do he promises that his passion has a purpose. His purpose is to transform our lives. He wants to give us his DNA. He wants a whole band of followers that understand if you want to be great in God’s kingdom, learn to be the servant of all. He wants that built into our DNA. It is to that end that he will give his life as a ransom.