

"There is no EZ-Pass to Following Jesus"

When our daughter Annika was in college out in New York, we found ourselves making many road trips to drop her off, pick her up, and move her stuff. Finally, I got smart. In her senior year I suggested that she only bring what she could fit in her car.

When we did visit, we found the quickest way to the southern tier of New York was on toll roads. When I mentioned one of the trips in a sermon, I think it was Martin and Evelyn Haanstad who talked to me after church and said, one of the best things they ever did was to buy an EZ pass transponder. An EZ pass allows you to zip through the toll lanes without having to stop, wait in line, and pay with cash or credit. Instead of cash, tickets and paper receipts, the EZ pass has a microchip tag placed on your windshield containing pertinent data which eases your way. Your data is quickly read by an electronic antenna as your car zooms on through. Then it automatically deducts the appropriate toll on your monthly statement. Thankfully I listened to the Haanstad's advice and got an EZ Pass. I think it's magic every time I pull up to a tollgate and it opens or gives you the green light. I feel smart and a little puffed up, especially when I see others waiting in the cash or credit lines.

Sometimes, or oftentimes, we want an EZ pass when it comes to discipleship of Jesus. We want the easy way to the front of the line, the quick way to glory, or the fast track to success without getting our hands dirty and doing the discipleship thing. We just want to know we are saved by grace through faith on account of Christ alone without having to worry about other's problems and having to do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with God.

This includes James and John in our Gospel today. You know, the fishing brothers Zebedee, who left their father and their nets to follow Jesus before he was even popular. Now they want Jesus to grant them the seats of honor, the places of glory, at Jesus' right and left hand at the next banquet they attend. After

all, they were part of the inner circle with Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration when Jesus became dazzling white and they heard a voice from heaven saying, “This is my Son, the beloved, Listen to him.”

But James and John and the disciples didn’t fully understand who Jesus was according to the Gospel of Mark. Jesus is the Messiah who will take on the role of a suffering servant like our first lesson from Isaiah. By his stripes we are healed. Jesus will vicariously suffer on our behalf on the cross. And even though Jesus just told them in verses 32-34, “See, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be handed over to the chief priests and the scribes, and they will condemn him to death; they will hand him over to the Gentiles; they will mock him, and spit upon him, and flog him, and kill him; and after three days he will rise again,” they had the gall to ask, “Teacher we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you.” What is it you are asking for? They wanted to be recognized as the top tier of disciples... even though Jesus just spent 2 chapters teaching them that greatness is serving all people and becoming like little children in order to enter the Kingdom of God.

Following Jesus means that there is no EZ pass when it comes to discipleship. In other words, you can’t live your faith in a vacuum... only for yourself... outside of community. Christians are meant to live in community with each other... to weep when we weep and to laugh when we laugh. There is no way to bypass the cross and the cross moments in people’s lives as disciples. You never know when God is going to spot you up to serve. We are called to enter into those moments with people and walk with them, pray for them, and serve them.

After the other 10 disciples heard James and John’s request, they were angry with them. Jesus then teaches that his followers are not to lord their greatness or privilege over others. That happens in the Roman empire. Instead, “In my kingdom, whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of

Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many” (Mark 10:44-45).

Jesus is the exemplar of serving others. He gave his life as a ransom for us and for our sinful ways... for those times when we only think of ourselves. But there is so much more to our faith than being saved and going to heaven. It is about the here and now. It is about love for the neighbor. In Matthew 25, Jesus says what you do to the least of these you have done unto me. Jesus promises to meet us in the face of others when we accompany people in their struggles and needs. And if you are feeling like the least, or feeling hopeless, or are scared for the future, the cross reminds us that Jesus is with us always to the end of the age. He will not abandon us.

And remember, Jesus didn't only predict his passion, but he predicted his resurrection. As Christians, there is always reason for hope. We are a death and resurrection people. Even when we experience suffering and loss in our lives, God will meet us there and give us resurrection hope. Amen!