

Lectionary 29/Proper 24 (B)  
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Text: Mark 10:35-45

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I remember one time driving through the mountains in Colorado, when the highway took us through a huge cutout. A whole chunk of the mountain had been sliced away to make the road straight and level. Where the mountain side was cut open, I could see layers upon layers of rock. They generally followed the same slope up the mountainside, but there was one place where the layers were hugely distorted. Instead of being stacked neatly, one on top of another, they were twisted and bent. In one place there was a huge loop of rock. I could follow one light grey band as a cross-section of it bent, almost at a right angle, straight up for 30 or 40 feet before curving over and then plunging back down again. I had never seen anything quite like that before, and it posed some really interesting geological questions. I wonder what could have folded the rock like that. Had it been subjected to enormous heat and pressure deep inside the earth? It looked like, touched by the massive power of the earth, the layers of solid rock had become almost like putty, bent this way and that, shaped and reshaped until those layers had taken on a whole different look.

We are being shaped too—by Jesus' vision for a world healed and made whole by the love of God. Jesus' words are working on us, over time, through the years of our lives, to shape us and renew us and remake us in the image of God's love. The Spirit of God is making, in our lives, a way of being human that is rooted in Jesus' way of compassion and generosity and humility. Jesus is making something new, a kind of human family that has never existed before, a humanity that loves God and cares for the earth, that treats every neighbor with compassion. Lots of people have never seen anything quite like that before. What the world is accustomed to looks a lot more like the way our gospel story pictures two of the disciples trying to pull a power grab, asking Jesus for positions of special privilege for themselves. And when the others found out, they were mad—probably mostly mad that they hadn't asked first. But Jesus is trying to reshape our lives—although I wouldn't say that Jesus is applying enormous heat or crushing pressure to us. So maybe it's more like this.

There was a time, a number of years ago, when I was plagued with stiff, tight, painful muscles in my neck and back. Once it got so bad I couldn't even turn my head to look over my left shoulder, and I walked around with what felt like a permanent, stiff, tense-looking posture. It finally got to be such an obstacle to normal life that I went to a massage therapist. She had me lay out on my stomach, and began poking and prodding here and there, feeling what the muscles were doing. And then she put her fingers over a spot way down in the middle of my back. To me, it felt like it was a long ways from where everything

was hurting. She pushed down, with very firm pressure. It felt almost like an electrical shock. And she kept pushing, kept applying pressure, until I began to feel the muscles all up and down my back start to relax, to unclench and stop hurting. It was like everything went back to its true shape, so that my shoulders weren't up around my ears any more, and I could breathe deep, full breaths, and I could even look over my left shoulder. When I left the massage therapist's office, life was good again.

As Jesus is working to shape our lives, his work is also a healing work. The touch of his word is firm. He doesn't say that we should live our lives in whatever way pleases us. He calls us to follow in his way of forgiveness and generosity and compassion and service. Jesus seeks to give us back the true shape of our lives, the sort of human life God intended for us from the beginning, to shape us and renew us and remake us in the image of God's love. The whole human family has been badly twisted out of shape. All of human history looks like a struggle for domination, to be a big deal at the expense of others. The motto of the human family seems to be, "me-first!"—just like James and John, and the other disciples too. But Jesus says, whoever wants to be first must be slave of all. He isn't offering a different method of competition (who can be most humble). In our gospel reading today, Jesus is working to get the kinks out of our hearts and minds, our attitudes and habits, to give us back our real shape.

He says, "You know how the world is." Among the Gentiles, the ones they recognize as rulers make big displays of lording their power and status over everyone else. The ones they think of as "great" are the ones who use power ruthlessly to serve themselves, to squash anyone who gets in their way. But it is not so among you. It is not so among you! When you think about being great, I want you to think about the one who is dedicated to making other peoples' lives better, who spends their time and energy in ways that are compassionate and generous and caring. If you were to have a "competition" to identify who's Number One, it would be the one who is most dedicated to giving of themselves for others—and not just so they can be "Number One," but truly for others. The way of life Jesus is describing is all about serving our neighbor, living with compassion, giving of ourselves.

And Jesus does much more than just talk about it. He lives it—for us! He came, not to be served, but to serve, and to offer up his life to reclaim us for God, to restore our relationship with our Creator, to forgive us and heal us and renew us, to open the door to life with God now and forever—for us. He's led the way, through life and death, all the way to the cross and grave and into new life—for us. So we gather, this day, and week by week, to be shaped by Jesus' word. Now, people may not confuse us right away with Mother Theresa, but they will receive our good will and our prayers. And when they need help,

they'll receive the sort of help we're able to give. When relationships are strained, they'll see us striving for forgiveness. They'll find we're not always asking what's in it for us, but we are always keeping an eye out for those who are vulnerable. They may not think we're the most fashionable or well-accessorized friend they have, but they'll think that we are always glad to share what we've got. And we seek to have our lives shaped by Jesus in these ways, and more, because Jesus has given us everything. He has touched our lives in such a powerful way that could we never go back to how things were before. In Jesus we have seen something so profound and beautiful—that we want to learn from Jesus, follow Jesus, be shaped by Jesus, because in Jesus we have seen our own true life. Thanks be to God. Amen