

November 11, 2018
Rev. Dr. Tom Blair

“A Distant Mirror”

Matthew 20:20-28
Second Presbyterian Church, Baltimore

Then the mother of the sons of Zebedee came to Jesus with her sons, and kneeling before him, she asked a favor of him. And he said to her, “What do you want?” She said to him, “Declare that these two sons of mine will sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your kingdom.”

But Jesus answered, “You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I am about to drink?” They said to him, “We are able.” He said to them, “You will indeed drink my cup, but to sit at my right hand and at my left, this is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared by my Father.”

When the ten heard it, they were angry with the two brothers. But Jesus called them to him and said, “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. It will not be so among you; but whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be your slave; just as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.”

Today is November 11, 2018, “Armistice Day.” One hundred years ago today a treaty was signed to end the ‘war to end all wars.’ In Latin “arma” means ‘arms’, and “sistere” means ‘stand still.’ Weapons of war were laid down after four long years and millions of lives lost all around the globe.

Here at Second Church we recognize one life lost, Private Carl Brandt (no relation to our current Brandt family members), whose name is memorialized on a plaque in the back of our sanctuary. We acknowledge and honor the supreme sacrifice he made for what he believed to be the war to end all wars, one of a nearly countless number who gave their all, doing their duty for “God and country,” as they put it.



Today I’d like to reflect on how it is that we are drawn to causes greater than ourselves, through some varied examples. I’ll begin with two memories, from my times living overseas.

I spent the summer of 1981 living in a small town in northern West Germany, Luneburg, about 40 miles southwest of Hamburg, a beautiful medieval city (which was spared Allied bombing in WWII.)

Enrolled as a student at a local Goethe Institute, I was studying ‘theological German.’ I boarded with an older lady, Frau Anna Braunberger.

I'll always remember the entryway into her humble house. There was a small chest of drawers and placed on it next to each other were two black and white photos of two men in uniform, both quite dashing. One wore a Maltese (German) cross around his neck and had a 'dueling scar' on his face (a 'schmisse'), a sure sign he was a warrior of the Kaiser. The other picture was of an equally dashing man in uniform, this time wearing the uniform of the Third Reich.

When I asked, in my halting German, who they were, she said "Mein Mann, und mein Sohn." Her husband had been killed on the front in France in 1916 and her son died in battle somewhere in the Soviet Union in 1944.

When I said that I was so sorry at her loss, "Es tut mir leid" (it brings me sorrow) she said, simply, 'Pflicht ist Pflicht.' (Duty is Duty.) 'Es ist die heilige Pflicht'— This is sacred, holy duty.

A mirror image of these photographs came to me the following summer when I traveled to Scotland to begin a year of study at New College, the theological college of the University of Edinburgh. There I boarded with another older lady, Charlotte Cluny, a nurse who had never married, but who loved to host students and have tea. In her home on West Saville Terrace, on her entryway stand, just through the cloak room were two framed pictures, one from each World War. One was of her uncle in his Royal Navy uniform, the other was her brother, in his RAF uniform. Both had died in their respective wars as well. All Charlotte could say about this when I asked her, was "they did their duty."

As you read through histories of WWI, as I sometimes do, you are struck by the level of



enthusiasm and devotion with which men went to war. The false expectations, the naiveté, the innocence they took with them into battle was incredible.

The human spirit is odd; indefatigable, perhaps, but still odd. The enthusiasm that troops developed, shared and instilled in one another to go 'over the top' in trench warfare is always astonishing to me. The amount of devotion and sense of duty that was developed to sustain them was remarkable.

The 'distant mirror' we see through (to use a phrase coined by the historian Barbara Tuchman) reveals something important about the human spirit. There is in us a deep desire to be part of something larger than ourselves, to make an impact; to be involved in something truly important, whatever it may be...

Perhaps the question for us today is the 'cause' greater than ourselves we look to ally ourselves with, who it is we turn to for guidance and direction in life when we are beyond the ability to help ourselves. Well, in the church, like with every answer to any children's sermon question, the one to whom we turn to is Jesus. This gospel scene for today is more interesting than you might think (any interaction with Jesus can really be pretty fascinating.)

The preceding passage to this is striking on its own. On the way to Jerusalem, Jesus' last time there- he reveals to them what is to happen next, but the disciples don't get it (in the Gospels, they never really do.) Ignoring the initial grim realities of what Jesus tells them, how he will be handed over to the authorities, whipped, tortured and crucified; apparently the gathered crowd including the disciples only hear the last phrase he shares, that on the third day he will be raised.

The unnamed mother of the Zebedee brothers (John and James) needs to ask Jesus something about what he's said. Jesus is very willing to give her a hearing. What does she ask? On behalf of her sons, she only wants the best for them. So, after Jesus makes it to heaven (discounting the ugliness that must take place before he gets there), could her two sons flank him on heaven's throne – is that too much to ask? There was an enthusiasm about her that her two sons apparently couldn't or didn't restrain.

Jesus could and did resist her request, quite undeniably. Making clear that it was not for him to say who would sit by his side in heaven, he told her that this was an inappropriate question.

Would they be able to follow him, step by step; even to 'drink the same cup' as he?

At their insistence of their ability to do so, Jesus allowed them some of their self-confidence. But he still deferred on his ability to determine one's place at the heavenly throne; that was plainly too much to ask.

Then he redirected all of the disciples to a more salient point. Their being upset about their placement in the heavenly pantheon was totally off the mark in terms of qualifications as being a legitimate follower of Jesus. No one was keeping count, after all.

They had everything upside down. Being a disciple means being a servant; not the one who is being served. Greatness is not elevating oneself over others, but rather being a help; being a servant, 'becoming last' in order to share in God's fullness together. Jesus then revealed to them his own truth, that he had come to give his own life for them, setting them to live freed from the powers of evil.

The Gospel account then quickly returns to Jesus' visit to Jerusalem; doing what he said he would do, much to the disciple's confusion, consternation and eventual amazement.

There are many ways to follow Jesus. For it to be real, a commitment needs to be made; emotionally, physically, financially, whether it's giving up prestige-real or imagined, precious time or hard-earned wealth. Following someone who willingly gave up their life for us necessarily works like that. There's no other way to put it.

But there are a multitude of ways for us to show our devotion to Christ and our desire to faithfully follow. Here's an example of a different sort.

This story comes from some years ago, again (this time it was 1992), when I was Associate Pastor at Davidson College Presbyterian Church. I led the college fellowship group there and we had a number of international students among us, some of them from China. They came to church to hear the gospel out in the open, unlike at home, where house churches were kept somewhat secret- you couldn't (and still can't) publicly advertise that you even exist. In China, 'evangelism' doesn't exist.

Toward the end of the academic year, one of the Chinese students decided that he wanted to be baptized. This got some of his fellow students pretty excited; they'd have a chance to take some pictures of him that they could send back home. What was interesting was that he was the only Chinese student, of about eight, who wanted to be baptized. The others were interested but were more inquisitive than committed (which was fine.) When the picture was taken he was the only Chinese student willing to be included.

Everyone else declined and let the American students surround him. When I asked why they didn't want their picture taken, the answer was clear. Now that he was baptized, his life would be ruined. He couldn't really go home; or if he did, he would be starting over from scratch, on his own. The government would not acknowledge him, he would lose his scholarship. He couldn't show any of those pictures to anybody back home. His life as he knew it was over; he was baptized into Jesus.

“Phlict ist Phlict.’ It’s about duty- to a point; but more than even more compelling force than duty is the gift of love; being part of something MUCH larger than oneself, and finding one’s place in it all...

One final story; from yesterday morning. I made a visit to the Islamic Society of Baltimore, over near Security Boulevard, in order to make a connection with an Imam in preparation for an Interfaith Service to take place here on the weekend of the World Day of Prayer next year, around March 1. It was a good visit. I met for the Men’s breakfast and had a wonderfully spicy omelet and some really great tea. I also had a very nice conversation with the Imam there and chatted about the nature of leadership in a religious setting. I used the phrase ‘servant leadership’, modeling what Jesus had to say in the gospel passage for this morning, and the Imam thought the idea novel and fascinating. I told him that I don’t make it up, and we agreed to talk about this some more, later.

Perhaps the most interesting part of the conversation is when I found out that Imam Ismet is originally from Turkey. I mentioned that today would be Armistice Day and asked what sort of commemorative events they have in Turkey for the end of the war. It turns out that like German and Austria, not much is done these days to recognize the end of the war. But he did say that he grew up near Gallipoli, a famous battle site where the Turks successfully defended a British/Australian attack, which serves a singular, unifying purpose of Turkish patriotism. (The battle of Gallipoli, in my understanding of history, is just the opposite- a resounding, horrible defeat and grievous loss of life.) Then we talked about these different understandings. Our mutual conclusion was that remembering WWI is even more reason for us to get to know each other better, and our respective worshipping communities as well.

We are drawn together by something greater than ourselves; the cause of peace and mutual understanding. I'm sure Jesus would agree.