

Job 38:1-7; 34-41
Mark 10:35-45

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BREAKING RANKS

At precisely 7:30 that Monday morning, I trudged into the Jury Assembly Room in the county courthouse. I was not completely awake, and I was not at all happy. Monday is my day off. The last time I had jury duty, I went to Upper Marlboro, waited for hours, had a limp salad in the cafeteria, waited some more, and was sent home. I expected another dull, tedious and boring day for which I'd be paid fifteen dollars. Yippee. What a great way to spend a day off. At least I had a good book to read. Jury duty is a responsibility of citizenship. That doesn't mean one has to like it. That's why it's called a "duty."

A courthouse official explained why we were there and what was expected of us, and distributed cards of various colors. Mine was orange. Finally, with the preliminaries out of the way, I opened my book and began to read. Two men sitting nearby struck up a conversation, and they weren't whispering. It was distracting. Great. I'm stuck in the courthouse for the day and can't even read.

I caught snatches of the conversation between the two men. They were discussing the scandalously high rate of incarceration in this country, how the lobbying of private prison companies skews our system of justice, what churches can do to assist "at risk" youth, and the responsibilities of parents. That was more interesting than my book. Tentatively I joined the conversation. One of the men was a professor of constitutional law and has traveled the world promoting human rights and sustainable agricultural development. The other was a retired truck driver who, through his huge, predominantly African-American church, works with troubled youth.

I was just beginning to get into the conversation when the people with orange cards were called. We went off to a courtroom. As expected, I wasn't needed and was sent back to the Jury Assembly Room. The professor was back, too. The conversation resumed. Dr. Bland (who is not at all bland) turned out to be quite a scholar of African-American history and culture. Our discussion ranged from the lingering effects of slavery to colonialism in Africa, to a reforestation

project in China, to my upcoming trip to Kenya, to the responsibility of parents for the education of their children. One by one, others joined in; a teacher, a couple of college students, a bus driver. Pretty soon we had a little seminar of ten gathered in a circle. Every person had something valuable to contribute to the conversation.

A little after noon, my name was called. I was free to go home. My jury duty was over. Dang. I would gladly have spent the rest of my day off talking with those people. Their names were called, too, so we scattered.

That little courthouse seminar was stimulating, informative, enlightening--and rare. Most of the time, we get together with people of the same race with similar experiences, points of view, values and goals. What made that discussion group so much fun is that we came from so many different walks of life. Jury duty turned out to be a gift; a gift from God.

Jesus and the disciples draw near to Jerusalem. We all know what will happen in Jerusalem. The disciples should have known. In the preceding verses Jesus has told them three times he will be arrested, killed, and rise again. In between, Jesus has told them people who follow him are people who:

- deny self for the sake of Jesus and the gospel, and risk and accept worldly shame.
- remain humbly dependent on God's power to do God's work.
- do not play games of competitiveness and glory grasping but choose the role of least of all and slave to all.
- relinquish control over who does what and how they do it in God's kingdom; in other words, give up the need to be God's quality control inspectors.
- keep the least in society at the center of their work.
- do not become burdened by possessions which have a nasty way of coming to possess us.

After all that, James and John ask for positions of high rank. "Grant to us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory." That's where the closest advisors to the emperor sat. James and John want to be Secretary of State and Secretary of Defense. They want to rank above others. It's as if they haven't listened to a word Jesus said.

Maybe they did listen to *one* thing. They listened when Peter declared Jesus to be the Messiah and Jesus didn't deny it. That's when they thought they had punched their tickets to the stars. They knew then they were destined for greatness. From that point on, they didn't hear all the ways Jesus redefined greatness in terms of service and sacrifice. James and John were still trying to pull rank while Jesus was determined to break ranks to smithereens.

It's easy to pick on James and John. They were disciples and their blunder is recorded for all time in the Gospel of Mark. But before we snicker at them, we'd better take a careful and honest look at ourselves. We've had two thousand years to get used to Jesus' radical redefinition of greatness. We even have the examples of James and John of how *not* to achieve greatness. Yet how hard it is for us, even today, to give up the need to judge ourselves better than others; the need to rank ourselves above others.

A strong young man at a construction site was bragging he could outdo anyone in a feat of strength. He made a special point of mocking Morris, an older worker. After a while, Morris had had enough. "Why don't you put your money where your mouth is?" he said. "I'll bet a week's wages I can haul something in a wheelbarrow over to that outbuilding that you won't be able to wheel back."

"You're on, old man," the braggart replied. "It's a bet. Let's see what you've got."

Morris reached out and grabbed the handles of the wheelbarrow. Then nodding to the young man, he said. "All right. Get in."

We wouldn't be as blatant as the young construction worker, but most of us do get caught up in competitive games. It might come when we're swapping stories. We halfway listen and halfway try to come up with a story that's even funnier or more heart-rending or more impressive. It might be when we're in a discussion and want to show how much we know about the subject. If we don't know anything about the subject, we look for an opportunity to change the subject. "Fascinating that about cryogenic rocket fuels. Speaking of cold, you wouldn't believe the blizzards I lived through in western New York."

We often pull rank when we take in the news of the day. Last week someone attempted to rob an armored car with a high-powered automatic weapon. He was shot. Two persons were caught shoplifting, attempted to drive away with an off-duty police officer's arm snagged in their car door, and they were shot. None of us would ever do anything like that. We're above that sort of thing. How do we know? We haven't lived the lives of those criminals. Maybe they didn't have parents who taught them good values and insisted they get an education. Maybe they aren't surrounded by family and friends who expect them to work hard and play by the rules. How do we know we're above anything, really?

We all close ranks simply by being lazy. We hang around with people who are similar to us and aren't much of a challenge. We don't often go out of our way to engage people with different backgrounds, different experiences and different points of view. Without even thinking about it, we close ranks.

Jesus was about breaking ranks wide open. Jesus was about shattering conventional systems of status, authority, and power. That's the Gospel. The Gospel is a blessing. That's the blessing I experienced talking with an exceedingly diverse group of people in the courthouse one Monday. May you break ranks and be blessed as well.

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