

## “Dare to stand tall!” Mark 10:35-45

And James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came up to him and said to him, “Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you.” And he said to them, “What do you want me to do for you?” And they said to him, “Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory.” Jesus said to them, “You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or to be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized?” And they said to him, “We are able.” And Jesus said to them, “The cup that I drink you will drink, and with the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized, but to sit at my right hand or at my left is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared.” And when the ten heard it, they began to be indignant at James and John. And Jesus called them to him and said to them, “You know that those who are considered rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. But it shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ!

Today’s Gospel reading helps us to reflect on yet another aspect of what it means to be a Christian in the world which is hostile to its Creator and Redeemer, on something that seems to be in short supply, that is – courage.

I would like to order our meditation in three parts. First, a little bit reflecting on **Jesus’ ministry**. Second, reflecting on **our own situation today**, and finally reflecting on **the most incredible company** we are blessed to belong to.

Now first about **Jesus’ ministry**. Do you ever wonder how it looked like and felt like from Jesus’ perspective? Since the beginning of His public ministry, He was almost always surrounded by people.

By His handpicked disciples, by the needy crowds that hoped that Jesus will help to fix their problems, by His ever-vigilant opposition that carefully listened to His every word. He was always among people, but also... so lonely.

No one knew who He really was. No one understood His mission. No one was able to grasp His teaching. It was so contra intuitive, so much against the common wisdom of that day, that people were constantly amazed, surprised and angry by what Jesus said and did.

Jesus could be very harsh against those who twisted the Word of God, those who were considered the most moral, the most religious and the most venerable members of society, those who seemed so good in their own eyes.

He taught that the corruption of our sin goes so deep that no amount of our efforts can help us, that we are hopeless on our own, that we need someone much more powerful to come and rescue us, to give us new hearts.

On the other hand, He welcomed and spent time with real sinners, promiscuous and corrupt people; whoever came to Him with repentant hearts. His radical message of salvation by grace alone to everyone who desires this gift of God transformed hearts and lives of so many unlikely people. Still does today...

Jesus taught that we need to fear, love and listen to God above all things, not to government or to majority views. That we are not to seek retribution and justice for ourselves, but instead He invited us to pray for our enemies.

Today we heard how Jesus taught that our greatness should be manifested in self-sacrificial service to others, and not through our attempts to get things done our way and for our good, while sacrificing others to achieve our goals.

He was like from another world. Actually, He was from another world, from the Kingdom of God which He brought into this fallen world. The Word became flesh, the Creator became creature.

In the midst of crowds, He stood completely alone. He had come to serve us and to give His life for many, but no one understood it. As today's reading shows it again, even the closest disciples at that time had no idea what burden Jesus was carrying, where He was heading, and what His mission was.

How is it, to be misunderstood all the time? How is it, when no one can affirm what you do, when no one can support you and genuinely encourage you, for they just don't get what you are doing? How is it, when those whom you have come to help resist, fight against and reject you?

How much strength Jesus needed to keep going in such situation? It is heart-breaking even to reflect on it. In best case scenario His closest disciples, as John and James in today's reading, came to Him asking for the worldly glory.

Jesus kept teaching about His sufferings and death, but they were craving for positions of worldly influence. In the worst-case scenario those whom He had come to save feared and hated Him so much that they crucified Him.

Jesus had come to serve us with truth and life. Standing alone. One man versus the world. But in every situation Jesus remained obedient to the Father, He never changed the message, He stuck with His mission, even if no one understood what He was doing, even if it meant rejection and sufferings.

This is how stubbornly Jesus is committed to us. We come into this world as His enemies. Most of time we don't get what He teaches and does for us. Too often we ask for something totally inappropriate and we don't get Him.

But none of that, not our enmity, not our foolishness, not even our apathy and hostility towards Him can scare Him away. He is on mission, to save us from sin and death and devil, and nothing can or will change His determination.

He has come to serve us. Even if we misunderstand Him. Even if we betray Him, fail Him and let Him down again and again, He has this incredible strength and He will never ever give up on His mission – to save you.

Now, let's reflect a bit **on our situation today**. Jesus was not afraid to stand alone and stand tall. Even if He was at odds with all the powerful of that day. Jewish government, Roman government, anyone with influence.

He stood tall and ... yes, He was crucified. After His resurrection, His disciples finally got what was going on. They got the cosmic grandeur of what they were called to be part of. The redemption of the whole creation.

The divine victory over sin, death and evil, the spread of God's Kingdom. They embraced the same point of reference as Jesus, they focused their hearts and hopes on the age to come – on the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting, with Jesus, in His presence, in New Heavens and New Earth.

Fearful bunch as they were, now they had become God-fearing and courageous messengers of truth. They too stood tall against all the hostile forces of this world, they didn't care about being called troublemakers by religious people, and they rejoiced that they were found worthy to suffer for the sake of Jesus.

They didn't proclaim what people wanted to hear. They proclaimed what people needed to hear. They were rejected by many as Jesus was. They were persecuted and eventually almost all of the apostles, but John, were murdered because of the message of eternal life that they had unceasingly proclaimed.

Their courage and faithfulness lied foundation to the Church Universal and the message they handed over to next generations brought the Kingdom of God to the farthest corners of the earth. This is how you were brought in God's family.

Thanks to their courage and sacrifice. And now it is our turn to proclaim the same message to the world that hates true God and fears His strength. Are we ready? What do you think? I think we have a problem. Not just one.

The first one is fear. We fear to stand tall. We fear to stand out, to be different. We fear to not fit in, to be rejected. This is true in our families, in our workplaces and among our peers. I can relate to that too well.

Today the world calls evil good and good evil. In almost every aspect of our lives. Are we willing to stand and say that we use different criteria for good and evil? Or are we ready to close our eyes and pretend all is well.

Today the world tells us that whatever we desire we are entitled to have and do, that man is a measure of all things. Do we dare to stand tall and say that the Triune God is the measure of all things?

The world demands everyone to conform and to obey to whatever the next artificial virtue is, and if you oppose it, you are accused to be an enemy of humanity and progress, a hater and bigot, and so on.

Are we ready to serve with the truth even if people don't get it and reject it? Are we ready to serve with what God knows His fallen creatures need, or do we want to please people more than God? These are hard questions...

It is difficult to stand against the spirit of time, against the tide of culture. It is so much easier to conform and to tell people what they want to hear, to fit in. But it is even harder to stand for something that we don't even know or understand.

And this is one more of our problems. How can we stand and confess something that we don't even know? If we do not abide in Jesus' words as He commanded, if we don't learn and keep everything He commanded, how can we even know what to stand for, what is truly good and according to the will of our Father?

Then we are spiritually, as Paul the apostle described, like "children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes."

I am afraid that we are not in the best possible shape. And here we come to our third topic, to one more wonderful blessing of our gracious and bountiful God. **The most blessed fellowship of God's saints.** The Church, the body of Christ, where true unity of the Spirit brings us together.

I fear to stand alone. I do. Even if I know that I stand for what is good and true and beautiful. The pressure of hostility makes me feel abandoned and depressed, it makes me lose sleep, I become irritable and unkind to my family.

It ruins everything. Sometimes doubts take over. "Did God really say that?" I so much prefer not to be in such situations. On the other hand, when such situations come, there is a blessing in them. They bring me on my knees. Those probably are my the most fervent and genuine prayers.

Such situations also bring me closer to my fellow saints, as I look for support and encouragement, for wise Christian advice and friendly embrace. These are the blessings that this wonderful fellowship of God's saints provides for us.

Support and encouragement, truth and wisdom and opportunity to grow in understanding and confidence and courage as we stand for the truth. And this is exactly why the devil so fiercely attacks our unity in the Word.

This is why he so hates pure teaching of the Gospel. For if he can sow disagreement among Christians, then there is no true unity anymore. If there is no true unity anymore, then there is no confidence in what is good and true.

If there is no confidence, there is no bold proclamation, we are afraid to take our stand. The message is silenced and the faith is not created. The evil one wins. In his last address to Pastors Conference, previous LCA president Dr. Mike Semler said that He is most concerned about the rapid decline of Biblical literacy among pastors and among laypeople.

Perhaps we are not in the best shape, but on the other hand, we are still incredibly blessed and there are all reasons to be hopeful. Remember how stubborn and determined Jesus is to complete His mission?

He has not only provided for us His message, accessible in every home, on every computer, on every mobile phone 24/7. He has especially blessed our Lutheran Church. Please, just don't get boastful, for that is not our merit, I don't know why He has given so much to us, that remains a mystery to me.

But we have the clearest and most beautiful exposition of the Gospel that there is. We have our Book of Concord, our magnificent Confessions, we have so much resources available for us, this is incredible!

As we move to the next stage in "The Way of Grace" review, this will be our focus. Abiding in the Word, supporting and encouraging and building one another up in true Christian fellowship, rejoicing in abundant gifts and surprises and wisdom of the Holy Spirit.

This may be challenging age for Christians. But so were others. Christians may be facing growing hostility. Probably. But, remember, you have received the same Spirit who enabled Jesus to complete His mission. The same Spirit!

The same Spirit who gave courage and wisdom to the apostles now dwells in you. The same body of Christ, which has kept proclaiming God's truth to the world for millennia is here to stand with you, to equip you, to support you and to rejoice with you if we are found worthy to suffer for Jesus' sake.

We lack nothing. There is overflowing abundance with this God. Moreover, we have Jesus' promises, that even when we fail, He will stand with us and will help up to get up again. There is nothing that can separate us from His love.

May the Spirit of truth, the Spirit of peace and the Spirit of courage help us to stand tall and to stand together!

Glory to the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit!

Amen.