

Well, the title game is set for the NCAA Men's Basketball Tournament tomorrow night and it's safe to say that very few people would've picked Texas Tech and Virginia to be playing in that game. It was an uphill battle just to get to the final four. Auburn and Texas Tech, you remember earning their first Final Four berths and Virginia, its first time since 1984. And Michigan State had to beat the number one overall seed, Duke, to reach the national semifinal. ESPN is one of the websites that creates an opportunity for you to make your own picks about who might win the tournament and they had 17.2 million people that filled out a bracket. And out of those, the final four was correctly predicted by just 7,928 and much less than that, the final game. It is an experience that is somewhat luck and some would say it's a science, but by figuring out who's going to be in the final, who are going to be the best of the best in the season, it's something that can be a little bit unexpected.

Even down to the last few seconds of the game, you could argue about whether the officials made some calls or whether they missed some calls, but you hardly ever see a Final Four with all number one seeds. Those that are ranked first at the beginning of the tournament, just a few short weeks ago, don't always end up on top and those that might be ranked lower find themselves in the final game. It can be unexpected to see who is going to play. And we find that situation just a little bit like that in the Gospel of Mark today. We see those that are unlikely suspects and those that are perhaps likely suspects and the answer, for them, is a little bit different. We'll discover a bit more as we go on this morning.

We are in the midst of a worship series in which we are taking a closer look at the Gospel According to Mark. This is one of the shortest gospels and tells the story of Jesus from beginning to end, and it invites us to consider how we find ourselves responding to Jesus' story. You've been invited to read along in this gospel over the last several weeks. And we're gonna complete it by Easter, just two weeks from today.

And if you're reading along, we invite you to read chapters 12 and 13 before next Sunday and then we'll finish it up the week after that. Now, the focus of this story ... we first want to look at James and John. These are two characters and, along with Peter, they are some of the key disciples among the 12 that Jesus has called. They are at the center of many stories in the gospels, in Matthew and Mark, Luke and John. They left everything when Jesus invited them to come and follow him, and they love Jesus and yet it seems that they didn't understand what following Jesus was all about.

They just didn't get it. Hear again, these words from Mark Chapter 10 verse 35. "James and John, Zebedee's sons, came to Jesus and said, 'Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask.'" Have you ever had a conversation start like that? Maybe a child or coworker, a family member or friend, "Now, I just want you to say yes. Just say yes to the question that I'm about to ask you." Have you ever been in that situation? "Don't worry about it. What I'm gonna say right now, just go along with it. It's gonna be just fine." I think it's a little bit like ... if you've seen the star wars movies, I think one of the scenes in there that was memorable was a Jedi mind trick. I think that James and John are trying this on Jesus, right?

Do you remember, in the movie, it was that these are the droids. These aren't the droids you're looking for. James and John, here to Jesus, "We want you to do for us whatever you ask." What do you think when someone leads off a conversation like that? Well, you're a little bit suspicious, at least I am. Oh well, let's see how Jesus responds in Mark Chapter 10:36, well Jesus responds, "What do you want me to do for you," He asked. He doesn't go for it. He doesn't say yes right away. He says, "Well, let me see

what it is that they're asking before I can respond." He finds out what they really want. And, they said, "Allow one of us to sit on your right and the other on the left when you enter your glory." Really, James and John, this is what you're asking for?

You remember that when they're asking these questions, Jesus had just made his final prediction that he would be handed over to the religious leaders, put to death and in three days would rise again. Jesus is on the way to the cross. He's tried to get this message across with his disciples over and over again, and yet here they are trying to skip the hard part, the role of suffering, the difficult days ahead and go right to sitting with Jesus in glory. "Can you give us that Jesus? Just say yes."

We find that Peter, one of these other core disciples, that we hear about over and over again, also misses the point. When Jesus first predicts his suffering and death a few chapters earlier, we find that as Peter, who objects, from chapter eight verses 31 through 33, "Then Jesus began to teach his disciples. The human one must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, chief priests and the legal experts and be killed. And then after three days, rise from the dead." He said this plainly, but Peter took hold of Jesus and scolding him, began to correct him. Jesus turned around and looked at his disciples and sternly corrected Peter. "Get behind me, Satan. You're not thinking God's thoughts, but human thoughts." Peter didn't get it either.

James and John didn't get it. You know, it's easy for me to look at these stories and to think, "But these disciples, they just don't know what they're doing. Peter. Seriously, this is basic manners. Don't talk back. This is Jesus. Even more than that, God's son, God in the flesh, he knows what he's talking about. Don't correct Jesus. James and John, hold your horses. You're already one of the 12 disciples. Oh, what more do you want? To be the top two? Oh, clearly, clearly you do." And yet, don't we do the same thing today? Like Peter, how often do I try to tell God how things are going to be?

I want to tell God what I have in mind for my life. And I don't always listen very well to what Jesus has to say about what's coming up. "Love your enemies. Pray for those who persecute you." Come on, Jesus. You don't really mean that, do you?

The author and humorist, Mark Twain, wrote these words, "It ain't the parts of the Bible that I can't understand that bother me. It's the parts that I do understand." That's the hard part, isn't it? You ever have trouble with that? I know that I do. Like James and John, how often do I believe that being powerful is important to God. That having people know my name, it means success. I don't always use the same words that James and John do, but I ask the same thing at times, "God, will you make me really important?" Whenever we find ourselves in a place like this, we have missed the point, just like James and John and Peter.

On the opposite side of the story, perhaps, we see blind Bartimaeus. Jesus responds to James and John. It's one of the rare occasions when Jesus did not do what was asked of him. He goes, "James and John, I can't do that for you." And, that's in contrast to this story of blind Bartimaeus, which we remember again in these verses. Jesus and his followers came into Jericho. As Jesus was leaving Jericho, together with his disciples and a sizable crowd, a blind beggar named Bartimaeus, Timaeus' son, was sitting beside the road. When he heard that Jesus of Nazareth was there, he began to shout, "Jesus, Son of David, show me mercy." Do you notice the difference here, in this initial conversation with Jesus? James and John say, "Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask." Peter corrects Jesus for predicting

what the future might hold. Bartimaeus says, "Jesus, Son of David, show me mercy." Mercy, when we don't get what we deserve.

Jesus calls the blind man over and asks the very same question that he asked and James and John, recorded a few verses earlier. Jesus asked him, "What do you want me to do for you?" The blind man said, "Teacher, I want to see." The blind man only seeks mercy from Jesus and only after Jesus' question prompting more, inviting him to ask more, "What do you want me to do for you?" Only then does the beggar say, "I want to see." He asked for something that will make a profound difference in his life. He asked for something that he is in need of here and now, not something in the future. He knows where he is lacking.

Jesus said, "Go. Your faith has healed you." At once, he was able to see, and he began to follow Jesus on the way. I don't know about you, but I wished that I would respond to Jesus more like this blind beggar, than James and John and Peter, because I know I do like James and John and Peter more often than not. "Jesus, I don't have it all together. I need your help. Jesus have mercy on me. What do I want you to do for me? Isn't it obvious? I want to be able to see with your eyes. I want to be able to love with your heart. I want to interact with my neighbors the way that you interact with your neighbors or, Jesus, I want to follow you. I want to be more like you."

We can become more like Jesus. James and John had been following Jesus for nearly two years and here we find them asking to be put in the places of honor, right after he told them that he was about to be put to death. Jesus says, "I can't do that for you. I can't put you in that place of honor. Instead, let me teach you about what it's like to follow me. It means that you have to take a path of service. Don't worry. I'm going there first to show you what it's like. I've been showing you. You can follow me. Even if you've asked to be put in the places of glory." Peter scolds Jesus when he first predicts that he will die, he talks back to the Lord of all creation. Jesus says, "Get behind me, Satan." Can you imagine harsher words from Jesus?

But this doesn't disqualify Peter. He still follows Jesus. He's still welcome. Jesus still says to him, "On this rock, I will build my church." The good news is that we don't have to get it right all the time to follow Jesus. James and John and Peter didn't get it right, so let the past go. Even if you know that you've messed up, you're in good company. These disciples, they all made mistakes and it doesn't matter. It doesn't mean that you can't follow Jesus. It doesn't mean that you can't become a more like Jesus. So just keep following. The invitation for us from scriptures that we might say the very same thing, that that beggar on the side of the road said, "Jesus, show me mercy. Show me mercy because I can't bear it, otherwise. When we ask for God's mercy, instead of telling God how it's going to be, we can be healed. We can be forgiven and we can be free. Will you pray with me?"

Lord Jesus, show us mercy, because we need it desperately. Forgive us for all that we've done wrong. Thank you for your love to us in Jesus Christ. Please fill us with your holy spirit and help us to live for you all of our days. We offer ourselves to you, oh God. In your holy name. Amen.