In our text from Mark’s gospel, Jesus offers a master class on discipleship, giving advice to James, John, and his other followers. Jesus talks to them face to face, as they walk along the road, not through a glossy video. The brothers James and John really want to be the best, so they come forward and say to Jesus, “Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you” (v. 35). They want to be helped by Jesus, like students desiring to learn how to serve like Serena Williams, act as well as Dustin Hoffman, or write like James Patterson.

“What is it you want me to do for you?” asks Jesus (v. 36), perhaps unclear if they want a lecture, a workshop, or a demonstration. They say to Jesus: “Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory” (v. 37). The brothers want to be seen as the very greatest of disciples, with places of honor at the right and left of Jesus in the kingdom of God.

But Jesus shakes his head and says to them, “You do not know what you are asking” (v. 38). He knows that you do not rise to the top by simply asking for recognition, or by watching an online video taught by a master. Jesus knows that it takes more than a class to cook like Gordon Ramsey or a seminar to shoot a basketball like Stephen Curry.

“Are you able to drink the cup that I drink,” asks Jesus, “or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?” (v. 38). According to New Testament professor Pheme Perkins, “they are being asked if they can accept the same kind of suffering that Jesus now faces.” Both “baptism” and “cup” are metaphors for suffering, not for worldly success. Jesus is asking if James and John will join him on the path to the cross, and they reply, “We are able” (v. 39).

While we may admire the enthusiasm of James and John, their quick and confident response sounds a little naïve. Do they really think they will rise to the level of Jesus, like a MasterClass student expecting to be able to play the cello like Yo-Yo Ma? Jesus then speaks the raw truth to them: “The cup that I drink you will drink; and with the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized” (v. 39). Sure enough, James will be killed in Jerusalem by Herod Agrippa, while his brother John dies of old age after a lifetime of hardship (Acts 12:2).

Then Jesus says to them, in reference to their request, “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.” He cannot guarantee that they will rise to the top, any more than Stephen Curry can predict the next MVP. And when the other 10 disciples hear this, they get angry with James and John (vv. 40-41).

At this point, Jesus offers the clearest guidance in his master class on discipleship, explaning how the rulers of the Gentiles are often tyrants: “You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them” (v. 42). Then he invites them to roll up their sleeves and get to work: “But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all” (vv. 43-44). Finally, Jesus ends with a demonstration, focused on himself: “For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many” (v. 45).

*A Talk. A Workshop. A Demonstration*. Three elements of a master class on discipleship, offered by Jesus. If Jesus were making instructional videos today, he would probably *talk* about how many leaders today still fight for personal recognition, dominance and power, and act like tyrants or petulant children. Jesus might talk about servant leadership, and about how servant leaders put the needs of their people first, helping them to develop as individuals who can do their very best. He might even raise Abraham Lincoln, Mother Teresa, or Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., as examples of servant leaders.

In a sermon based on this Scripture passage from Mark, Dr. King said that there is “deep down within all of us an instinct. It’s a kind of drum major instinct — a desire to be out front, a desire to lead the parade, a desire to be first.” King concluded by saying that at his funeral he hoped someone to say that he tried “to give his life serving others…to feed the hungry…to clothe those who were naked…to love and serve humanity. Yes, if you want to say that I was a drum major, say that I was a drum major for justice. Say that I was a drum major for peace. I was a drum major for righteousness. And all of the other shallow things will not matter.”

Jesus would also invite us into a *workshop* on servant leadership, pushing us to find greatness in our service to others. One of the greatest qualities of servant leadership is empathy, which is the ability to see yourself in someone else’s shoes. Empathy is critically important whether you are serving on a church board, mentoring a teenager, serving a hot meal to a homeless person, or having a conversation with a grieving neighbor.

“Empathy is a key aspect of leadership,” writes Jennifer Stasak. “It’s easy to get hyper-focused on tasks and the work that we do. Work is important and accomplishing goals is, too! But if we’re not careful, we can begin to see people as problems to be solved instead of human beings to be loved.” The greatest among us will always put people first and be the “slave of all” (v. 44). Servant leaders are empathetic; they see people through the eyes of Jesus.

Finally, Jesus offers us a *demonstration* of servant leadership through his actions as the Son of Man, who “came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many” (v. 45). Jesus always put others first: Feeding thousands of hungry people, healing the sick, and washing the feet of the disciples. Jesus allowed himself to be lifted high, not on a pedestal but on a cross, offering his body and his blood to bring us forgiveness and new life. “He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross,” said his disciple Peter, “so that, free from sins, we might live for righteousness” (1 Peter 2:24).

Today, we remember those members of our faith family who died this past year. The people we honor today could each, in their own way, teach us a master class in discipleship. Among their ranks we find veterans, salesmen, a waitress, a child advocate, a doctor, a teacher, a musician, and a state employee who faithfully served our community and its citizens. They were also caregivers, drivers, spiritual advisors, volunteers, and friends. Each sought to improve the life of their neighbors, and in doing so raised the quality of life in our community. These are lives filled with integrity, humility, flexibility, resilience, stewardship, and empathy. If you are curious about serving others or being a disciple of Jesus, their lives are the only master class you will ever need.

Feeding, healing, washing, and sacrificing. Jesus met the needs of others, giving of himself completely. In his words and actions, he offered an unforgettable demonstration of what it means to serve others.

Prayer: Heavenly Father, give me a heart like the heart of Jesus, a heart more ready to serve than be served, a heart moved by compassion towards the weak and oppressed, a heart set upon the coming of your kingdom in the world. Amen. (adapted from John Baillie)

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**Master Class**

Sunday, November 7, 2021 Mark 10:35-45

Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

If you are online at all, you have probably seen an ad for MasterClass, the online-learning platform where you can learn skateboarding from Tony Hawk, filmmaking from Martin Scorsese, photography from Annie Leibovitz, comedy from Steve Martin, acting from Helen Mirren, or communication from Jane Goodall. I saw the MasterClass ad featuring Chef Gordon Ramsay and it felt like a trailer for a blockbuster Hollywood film. It is captivating, and I guess the rest of the world agrees because it is the most-watched MasterClass ad on YouTube with over 95 million views. But it got me thinking: What’s the story behind MasterClass?

MasterClass is the brainchild of David Rogier, inspired by a story told by his grandmother, who grew up in Krakow, Poland. When the Nazis invaded, she and her mother fled to New York City, where she took a job in a factory. Aiming for a better life, she applied to 50 medical schools, only to be rejected by every single one. Confused, she called the Deans of Admissions to ask why? One dean told her, “You have three strikes against you. You are a woman. You’re a foreigner. And you’re Jewish.” Unfazed and resilient, she kept applying, eventually got accepted, graduated from medical school, and built a highly successful practice. Rogier was in second grade when his grandmother shared this story with him, telling him: “David, I’m trying to tell you that education is the only thing that someone can’t take away from you.”

Reflecting on this, Rogier says, “I wanted to build a school that teaches things that people can’t take away from others. I wanted to create a school that made it possible for anybody in the world to learn from some of the best minds and masters of their crafts. I thought, how do we do this affordably, where it’s not thousands of dollars. How do you do it in a way for somebody like me who is curious and wants to learn?” And so, with business partner Aaron Rasmussen, David Rogier founded MasterClass with the motto: “everyone should have access to genius”.

MasterClass launched in 2015 with just three classes: Dustin Hoffman on acting, Serena Williams on tennis, and James Patterson on writing. MasterClass proved widely popular, raising $135 million in venture capital from 2012 to 2018, and now offering 85 classes across nine categories. The program claims to offer a premium, high-level learning experience because its classes are taught by the very best in the world.