

Sermon  
Oct. 17, 2021  
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Our scripture read today involves two different scenarios.

First, there is the request of James and John for the prominent and favored spots in the Kingdom. Secondly, there is the anger of the other disciples at James and John, and Jesus' response to that.

That request made by James and John at first glance seems rather reckless and bold. Where have they been? Haven't they seen and heard what was happening around them? Did they somehow miss the point when Jesus put the little child in their midst, or blessed the group of children who otherwise seemed like a bother, or confronted the rich man with the need to break with his material possessions? Were they deaf to Jesus' words about his own future and the risks of what following him would mean?

There are 2 other versions of the story in the Bible. In Luke's gospel it is sort of just glossed over, calling it "*a dispute*" over which one of the disciples would be the greatest. In the Matthew version, perhaps the author is a bit uncomfortable with the arrogance of James and John. He has the mother of the sons of Zebedee making the request on their behalf. Sort of like laying the blame on the pushy mother instead!

What are we to think here?

We might assume that the question of James and John is inherently just wrong and they just don't "*get it*". But, it might be helpful for us to remember that James and John are not coming out of nowhere with their request. There has been some conversation, prompted by Jesus, about the kingdom of heaven and about the thrones that would be made available to each of them. The brothers are simply revisiting the conversation that Jesus had started and taking the opportunity to be bold and ask for something they desire.

Jesus doesn't come back at them with "*how dare you! Who are you to pursue power? Who are you to sit to the right or left of me?*" Instead, what Jesus does is basically ask "*Do you really understand what it is that you're asking for? Do you understand everything it will entail and what it will require of you?*"

James and John are products of a culture that, much like our modern day cultures, sees being elevated to high positions as a way to garner power and protection. Jesus' ministry and very nature are in direct conflict to this mindset.

Barbara Brown Taylor has this to say about power:

*“Power thrives in the rare air at the top of any given hierarchy. One sure sign that people have power is that other people want to get near them—to photograph them, to attack them, to cheer them, to inhale them—it hardly matters what their motives are. It is the power itself they cannot resist, the chance to get close to someone who has something they do not, in hopes some of it will rub off on them. This fascination with power has been going on forever. It is how the world works.*

*Every now and then the powerless become powerful and nine times out of ten they turn out to be as heartless as their predecessors. And yet, most of us have this abiding hope that if only the right people can get into power and stay there, without letting their power corrupt them, then the world will be a better place. We want them to sit at the head table and make good decisions for us.”*

Jesus asks James and John if they are really ready to suffer with him—that part about baptism and drinking the cup. Jesus is talking, really, about a baptism of fire and a cup of suffering he is going to endure. James and John seem to give a rather bland response: *“Sure, we’re able.”*

Taylor says, *“When the kingdom comes, James and John want to sit as close to Jesus as they can, and while this may be an example of gross ambition on their part, it may also be a case of profound faith. They believe that Jesus will reign. In spite of his dire predictions, in spite of the storm clouds gathering on the horizon ahead of them, they are so sure of Jesus’ final victory that they sign up to go with him.”*

Fear is the other factor that comes into play. In verse 32, just a few verses ahead of our reading today, it says that *“those who followed Jesus were afraid.”* With that in mind, James and John become more sympathetic characters. Maybe—Jesus’ predictions of his outcome have become clear to them. Maybe, just maybe, they do indeed understand what lies ahead.

But, being afraid, they seek the promise of a secure future. James and John may not just be power hungry, they may just be acting quite naturally on their fears. I imagine all of us, at some time or another, have retreated into that fear mode.

So, rather than being a little harsh on the disciples for their occasional failures, perhaps we should keep in mind our own personal failures. Maybe we should also recognize the ways in which fear breeds the desire for security in our own society. The fear of terrorism has led to all kinds of fateful actions, including government surveillance of citizens and preemptive war—all in the name of security. Fear over the so called demise of the mainline church has led to all kinds of efforts to secure ourselves. Sometimes, as much as we would like to deny it, the

“love one another” ethic gets swept away by fear in our one-on-one interactions.

I ran across this short story on how we are sometimes driven by fear of the unknown: (And there are a LOT of unknowns in our lives right now!)

There once was this criminal who had committed a serious crime. He was sent to the king for his punishment. The king told him he had a choice of two punishments. He could be hung by a rope OR take what’s behind the big, scary, mysterious iron door. The criminal quickly decided on the rope. As the noose was being slipped on him, he turned to the king and asked: “By the way, out of curiosity, what’s behind that door?” The king laughed and said: “You know, it’s funny. I offer everyone the same choice, and nearly everyone picks the rope.” “So,” said the criminal, “Tell me. What’s behind the door? I mean, obviously, I won’t be able to tell anyone,” The king paused and then answered: “Freedom— but it seems most people are so afraid of the unknown that they immediately choose the rope.”

Charles Campbell writes that in the larger context of today’s Gospel read, there is a great promise for the church. “We need not always live in fear; we need not continually seek out our own security. Rather, we have Jesus’ promise that we can and will live as faithful disciples as we seek to follow him.” It is a promise made to such a sometimes fumbling, stumbling group of disciples as all of us!

Campbell says that our text offers an alternative to the system of domination in place. “The rulers who lord it over them, and their great leaders exercise authority over them.” (Vs 42) The sort of system that creates hierarchies of dominant and subordinate, winners and losers, insiders and outsiders, honored and shamed.

Jesus calls the community of faith to something else. Lamar Williamson says, “There’s more to it than just staying on the straight and narrow. It’s more than just getting our lives together, and may be even disruptive at times, requiring a costly pouring out of one’s life for another—whether it be an aging parent, a challenging spouse, a special child, or ANY person whose situation elicits neighborly service at personal cost.”

Throughout his ministry Jesus resisted those systems of domination in the Roman Empire. Maybe he sets us free to do the same. To take up “The Way”, each one of us, even in our own distinctive fumbling, stumbling, and authentic manner. It is sort of the ultimate “trickle up” effect. To never surrender our inherent power to the so called powerful. The power God has granted us is the strongest stuff of all—the power to serve.

Thanks be to God!