

October 20, 2024
“Servant’s Heart”
Psalm 104:1, 24-35 / Mark 10:35-45
Pastor Tim

On the surface, the brothers James and John, the sons of Zebedee, come off as arrogant. That’s why their fellow disciples are pissed off when they find out what they did.

And what did they do?

They asked Jesus for favored positions, elevated positions, at his left and right hand – in his glory; that is, in his power, in his majesty. Remember that James and John, along with Peter, were witnesses to Jesus’ dazzling transfiguration up on the mountaintop, witnesses to Jesus standing in spirit with Elijah and Moses. They have seen Jesus in his glory, and they want to keep it that way.

They have in mind what many Jews of the time did, that Jesus was the prophesied Messiah who would come, in glory, to save them, to liberate them, from the tyranny of Roman occupation and rule. A mighty king who would forcefully overthrow the Roman emperor and usher in a new KINGdom.

But this is nothing more than wishful thinking. Pure fantasy.

On the surface, it seems like James and John haven’t been paying attention in class. It seems like they have already forgotten Jesus’ teaching about the cost of discipleship – the counterintuitive pronouncement that to follow him requires losing their own lives, for the sake of the gospel, for the sake of love, in order to save them.

It seems like they’ve forgotten Jesus’ response to the argument they and their fellow disciples previously had about who among them was the greatest.

“Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.” Using a little child as a visual aid to make his point: “Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me ...”

It seems like they’ve forgotten Jesus’ further teaching, when they and their fellow disciples try to turn away people bringing their little children to Jesus for healing – that it is, in fact,

children to whom the kingdom of God belongs: “Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the (kingdom) of God as a little child will never enter it.”

But they haven't forgotten.

Note how they approach Jesus, before they make their request: “Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you.”

That's what you say when you already know what the answer's gonna be, right? When you already know that you're not gonna get the response you're looking for.

They haven't forgotten. They just don't want it to be true, that you have to lose your life in order to save it. That you have to make like powerless children in order to experience the kingdom.

And why don't they want it to be true? Because they are afraid.

What we don't hear in our reading this morning is the text that immediately precedes this one. It's the THIRD time Jesus predicts his own death.

The first time comes a couple of chapters earlier, after Peter declares that Jesus is his Messiah. Again, the Messiah that Jewish prophecy imagined would come, in glory, to save them. That's when he tells them, if they mean follow him, that they'll have to lose their lives in order to save them.

The second time comes a little later, after which we're told that the disciples “did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him.” And after which we get that argument among the disciples about who's the greatest.

Their collective, instinctive reaction to the prediction of Jesus' death, the death of the One they hoped, believed, would save them, is exactly the same reaction James and John have in asking Jesus—IN HIS GLORY, not in his humiliating death—to grant them seats of power at his right and left.

They are not arrogant, they're just afraid.

As Steve Garnaas-Holmes suggests, "The disciples are beginning to get that sinking feeling that Jesus is speaking literally, that people in power are going to stop him with deadly force—and they themselves will be in danger."

They don't want Jesus to die. THEY don't want to die. They want to save their lives. They want to welcome a new king who will save all their lives. They want their Messiah to be powerful, to do what they've always imagined the Messiah WOULD do.

As it becomes clearer to them that Jesus is not THAT Messiah, that this kingdom, what Jesus calls the kingdom of God, does not work THAT way, they panic. And they do what people often do when they panic, when they are afraid: they grab for power and control.

When we are afraid, there is no room for love.

As we're reflecting in our book study, they essentially do what white Christian nationalists have been and are doing: believing, rooted in fear, that their vision of and for the world is threatened, they are grabbing for power and control. In this case, "power-over," as Carter Heyward describes it in the book we're reading together, *The 7 Deadly Sins of White Christian Nationalism*.

Believing that their historically privileged and protected, racist, misogynistic, capitalist, xenophobic, nativist, fundamentalist Christian vision of this country and the world is threatened, in an increasingly diverse and pluralistic context, they are grabbing for more power and more control in any and every way they can, by any means necessary. Including, of course, through violence. And fear-mongering. Misplaced fear.

But in doing so, no less than with James and John and their fellow disciples, it is not Jesus they are following.

When we allow our fear to displace our love, we are not following Jesus. Jesus has an altogether different vision of and for the world, a kingdom defined above all else by love, not fear. An altogether different understanding of power, what Heyward calls "power-with," not power-over.

Jesus responds to James and John and the disciples exactly as he did when they were all arguing about who was the greatest. They want to move up, but Jesus brings right them back down to earth, again, back to their deepest calling: "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."

He calls out the culture of dominance and power-over they know all too well. In the end, the Messiah they've long imagined coming to save them would do nothing to confront the culture of dominance and power over; and so nothing more than replace the one who holds such power.

For those who suffer under the weight of occupation and oppressive power, the instinct to simply reverse roles is understandable.

But Jesus means to upend the whole system, from power-over to power-with. Jesus means to EMPOWER his disciples, his would-be followers, to quit waiting for some powerful Messiah to save them and start recognizing and living into their own power to make such a world possible.

And so he continues, telling them as he has told them before: "But it is not so among YOU; ..." YOU GOTTA BE DIFFERENT. YOU GOTTA DO THINGS DIFFERENTLY IF YOU EXPECT THINGS TO BE DIFFERENT. TO CHANGE.

"But whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be servant of all."

The KINGdom of God is among YOU. The KINGdom of God is within YOU.

Greatness, in God's KINGdom, is measured by GOODNESS. As the ancient Greek rhetorician, grammarian and philosopher Athenaeus said, himself writing a few centuries after Jesus and still within the context of the Roman Empire, "Goodness does not consist in greatness, but greatness in goodness."

The way to the kingdom of God, the kingdom of love, is not through power-OVER, but power-WITH. Service. Peace-making. Justice-seeking. NONviolence. Love of neighbor AND perceived enemy as for ourselves.

“The greatness of a community,” said Coretta Scott King, “is most accurately measured by the COMPASSIONATE actions of its members.” Imagine!

And as Marianne Williamson suggests, “Nothing LIBERATES our greatness like the desire to help, the desire to serve.”

Jesus means to liberate us. We remember the Jesus, the Teacher, who kneels down before his disciples. Who pours water into a basin and washes and dries their feet. And when Peter objects, insists, “Unless I wash you, you have no share with me. ... For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you.”

A servant’s heart, soft and open. Jesus, modeling the servant’s heart, means to liberate his disciples, and so us, from the oppressive, exhausting weight of living and moving through the world hard-heartedly. From misguided and self-serving, self-preserving notions of greatness that insist on hierarchy. That depend on first and last. That rely on power-over, and inevitably lead to tyranny.

This is the paradoxical power of powerlessness. Greatness found in goodness, divine goodness. The good we share together when we allow solidarity to replace territory. When we allow service to replace superiority, compassion to replace callousness, kindness to replace cruelty, mercy to replace meritocracy, love to replace fear.

“There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear.”

Friends, in our churches, our communities, our country (including, INCLUDING in this critically important election), in the world we all share together with the whole of Creation, may it be so.