

St. Columba's Episcopal Church  
October 20, 2024 – 22 Pentecost  
Mark 10:35-45 – To Sit by Jesus  
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To better appreciate this morning's Gospel lesson, it is helpful to remember that Jesus and his apostles have been traveling and, on their way, Jesus has explained what is going to happen to him. For the third time, in verses just before today's lesson, Jesus says: "The Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him, and three days after being killed, he will rise again." He has made it clear that they are traveling with him on the road to Calvary. And what happens? The brothers James and John ask for a favor, "Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory." They want the "best seats." And the reaction of the other ten disciples is to be angry with James and John because they had the presumption to ask for this favor. We can imagine them all saying, "Why should they sit next to Jesus in glory? Who do they think they are? Don't we have as much right as they do to the best seats?"

It is difficult to absorb this radical teaching of Jesus: "whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all." It is contrary to what we have learned in our society, to the values we are exposed to in our culture. As Jesus said, speaking of the Roman aristocratic political system of his day, "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" (Mark 10:42). We can translate this easily into modern times. People continue to strive for power and position, to grasp for more and more of the world's goods and services, to "kiss up and kick down," to bully the weak, and to forget the poor and broken and disadvantaged persons in our communities. We experience pressures from within ourselves and from our consumer culture to take what we want when we want it, placing our needs and desires ahead of others'.

Before we go on to consider the conversation between Jesus and the sons of Zebedee, I want to say a word about Jesus' direction to his followers to be servants and slaves. This is not license for some human beings to make other people servants or slaves, to exploit others as if that were God's will for them. No, that's exactly what Jesus is challenging in this passage. We are not to "lord it over" others.

Looking at history in any time period and looking at current events that will one day be history, the danger and terrible consequences of people who "lord it over" other people are shockingly clear. Or when we look at much smaller settings than nations and the world, when we look at domestic violence, for example, we also see the terrible damage caused by those who "lord it over" the weak – children and elderly people among others. We may be called to do whatever is in our power to stop the dangerous actions of those people who regard others as less valuable than themselves.

It seems to me that there is a continuum of attitudes that one person or a group of people may have toward others. On one end, there is the view that other people are objects to be used and exploited, legitimate objects of hatred and contempt whose wellbeing is of no account. On the other end, there is the Christian view that in others we see the face of Christ, that each person's wellbeing is important because each person is a beloved child of God, that those people who are on a path of hatred and violence are the lost sheep of our Good Shepherd, Jesus, and potential recipients of the mercy and forgiveness of God.

I think many, if not all of us, have felt strong ill will, even hatred for people who do incalculable harm acting from their raging egos and with disregard for the lives of people they hurt. If we want to move in the direction of the Christian view I spoke of, how can we turn away from our ill will and hatred or even desire to turn away? The answer may lie in humility and compassion and love.

Humility with respect to God is the beginning. As we heard in our reading from the book of Job, God reminds us of our place as human beings who are creatures and not the Creator. "Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth?" We were not there, and it is impossible for us to fully comprehend the works of God. We need to resist the temptation to think we understand more than we do.

Then there is humility and compassion with respect to our own lives and the lives of other people. Life can be extremely difficult. Though human beings can be amazingly resilient, we are also vulnerable in so many ways. If we can face our own vulnerability, then we may grow in compassion for the vulnerability of others, especially those with far fewer blessings than we have. And if we look at our lives with compassion for our weaknesses and failings, for the temptations we have faced and resisted – "there but for the grace of God might I have gone" – then we may grow in compassion for the failings of others. I have found this extremely difficult myself. But in occasional moments of grace and prayer I have sometimes felt compassion rather than ill will for people who hurt others, people who have fallen so short of being the people God had meant them to be. As I tell it, this may sound spiritually patronizing. But that's not how it has been for me. This prayer has come from rare moments when humility and compassion have met together in my heart. I wonder if this is one meaning of having the mind of Christ.

Finally, love. What if our hearts were so on fire with love for God and God's people that we would both freely pray for the wellbeing of everyone – even those people who harm others – and regularly and freely choose to serve others in need? Might this be another aspect of putting on the mind of Christ – or perhaps more accurately, the heart of Christ? Is this what we see in St. Francis tending lepers or Mother Teresa serving the dying poor in India – a glimpse of what it might mean to share in the love of Christ? Is Jesus' command to serve others really an invitation to love as he loves?

When James and John asked Jesus for the privilege of sitting at his right hand and his left, Jesus said to them, "You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?" In other words, can you face being a martyr, as I will be? James was, in fact, one of the first Christian martyrs. And at the time Mark was writing this Gospel, joining the Christian community or participating in Christian worship meant risking torture and death. James and John wanted to skip the road to Calvary and go straight to glory. Jesus told them that isn't the way it goes – for him, for them, or for us. Much as we might desire that story, it isn't the human story. But the story doesn't end at Calvary. The story ends with the empty tomb. Jesus has gone before us to new life.

When we approach Jesus with humility, knowing that we are not "the greatest," or worthy to sit at Christ's right hand or his left, then we may find ourselves seated next to Jesus after all. He is waiting in the lowly places, in the worst seats in the house, in the seats we'd like to avoid. He is waiting there for us to turn to him and find him, to follow him and to love and serve some of God's beloved children in this time and this place. May we say "yes" to his precious and holy invitation. Amen.