

James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came forward to Jesus and said to him,
"Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you."

And Jesus said to them,
"What is it you want me to do for you?"

And they said to him,
"Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory."

But 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?"

They replied,
"We are able."

Then Jesus said to them,
"The cup that I drink you will drink; and with the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized; but 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."

When the ten heard this, they began to be angry with James and John.

So Jesus called them and said to them,
"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.
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. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many."

Jesus and his disciples are on *The Way* to Jerusalem. That's code language: before they were actually called *Christians*, the earliest followers of Jesus called themselves "people of *The Way*." It's an interesting choice of words that signifies motion—a pilgrim people who are on the move. And not just on the move to anyplace but to a quite specific place: Jerusalem. Following Jesus, as he has made very clear earlier in Mark's Gospel to Peter and the others, is about taking up our own crosses to follow him.

So they are walking and talking, as people do when they are on the way somewhere. They still don't get it, so they are like little kids, I expect: "are we almost there, Jesus?!" Jesus is leading *The Way* when James and John—the Zebedee boys—*came forward to him*. I think we are meant to imagine

them running to catch up with him, almost breathless, like they just had this great idea. They have this favor to ask.

They quote Psalm 110—that is the favor they have to ask of him—that they might sit at the right and left hands of Jesus in order to “rule over all enemies.” That’s what the psalm is about: it’s about how when messiah comes he will “smite kings and rule the nations.”

Isn’t it great to be able to mask your ambitions in piety? What they are asking for is that when Jesus arrives in Jerusalem to kick some butt and overthrow Roman imperial power that they might be secretary of state and secretary of defense, respectively. But to be able to quote the Bible in asking for a cabinet position is really great, because it makes them feel like what they are asking is really about responding to God’s call!

For goodness sake, they just don’t get it! In spite of the fact that Jesus only recently rebuked Peter and called him Satan for making the same mistake and in spite of repeated talk about his impending death, the Zebedee boys still think that being close to Jesus is like hanging out with Dale Carnegie: that somehow the end result here is that they’ll win friends and influence people and get rich and that they’ll set up a new government in Jerusalem and all the lobbyists will have to go through them! Junkets to Scotland for golf is only the beginning!

But of course it isn’t just they who don’t get it. I think that Mark mocks the disciples—at least the *male* disciples—because religious people are no different from “real” people, they are just more that way. I say male disciples because Mark is pretty clear that women do get it—at least in the story he has to tell. Women are described with the Greek word for servant again and again—the same word we use for “deacon.” Women in Mark’s Gospel—and children as well—get it that the tables are turning, that the answer is blowing in the wind and the wind is of God—of God’s creating and sustaining Spirit—that the wind is about change.

Jesus is about the original regime change. Only the Kingdom of God isn’t about a new government that is in fact more of the same, after all the campaign promises have been made and the work of governing actually begins. The Kingdom of God is about a radically new way to order relationships. Jesus is about a world where the lame enter first, where the child is put in the center, where the women model true servanthood leadership, where the poor and the hungry and the sick and the weak are all made strong. It’s not about entitlement nor about getting close to Jesus is in order to have access to power.

In this new community that Jesus is building, the last really are first. It is not the love of power, but the power of love, that holds sway. It is not domination but relationships characterized by love, mutuality, and trust that matter. The one who wishes to lead in a community such as this community must be servant of all.

The problem we face simply because of the nature of the human condition—or as the theologians would say because of human Sin—is that power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely. I believe that. I believe that good people go into the ministry, into business, into politics to change the world. And then they get power. And when they do, they lose their idealism and worry more about how to hold onto power than about being agents of change. That is just how the world always seems to be. Nothing seems to change: whether one is talking about the fringes of the Roman empire in first-century Palestine or corporate America or the Washington, D.C. It is simply good to be king.

But Jesus (whom we ironically call our “king” and our “lord”) insists on a radically new understanding of power. It is not devoid of power—not the absence of power. But it refuses to be coercive power; it refuses to *dominate* anyone. Rather than power *over*, Jesus offers power *through*: the power of persuasion, the power of healing, the power of one, the power of two or three people gathered together in his name to do justice and love kindness and walk humbly with God. Jesus is about empowering people through love.

Margaret Mead once said: “never doubt that a small group of committed citizens can change the world; it’s the only thing that ever has.” I hear Jesus saying something very similar in today’s gospel. He’s saying: “never doubt that a small group of committed Christians can change the world and its power systems: because it is the only thing that ever has.”

We worship a man whom we claim to be God-in-flesh. Think of how much the lobbyists would pay to get access to him! But on the last night of his life, he wraps a towel around his waist and washes his disciples’ feet. He does the work of a slave. He commands them to love one another. He dies, yet is alive, so that we also might live and offer the world that same love. The Church has never done well when it gets too much worldly power. That is why I am not nostalgic for the “good old days” when the Episcopal Church held such sway in our society. I’d rather that we exist “under the radar”—that we figure out again how to be the Church, how to be a community that has its eyes on Jesus—that is moving with him on *The Way* to the Cross.

There is this great scene that always gives me chills in the film about Mahatma Gandhi’s life. It’s when Gandhi tells his wife that it is their turn to clean the toilets, and his wife draws the line there. “That,” she tells her husband, “is the work of untouchables.” Within the Hindu caste system, she is reminding her husband, that work is beneath us. Gandhi, however, responds to his wife emphatically: “here, in this community,” he says “there are no untouchables.”

I love it that Gandhi also said once that it wasn’t Jesus he had a problem with, but Christians and that if and when Christians actually started to *behave* like the Lord they claimed to follow...well on that day, Gandhi said, he’d convert from Hinduism to Christianity! That is a very simple strategy for evangelism—which after all means good news. We don’t need a better marketing strategy in the church. We don’t need a slick new brochure, or the ten habits of highly successful Christians. We simply need to remember who and whose we are—what it means to be the Church as people who are on *The Way*. We need to see Jesus more clearly, love him more dearly and follow him more nearly and if we build on that, people will come.

Don’t be too hard on the Zebedee boys. We are they. But when we do behave in ways that are akin to the One we have promised in baptism to follow, by living into our call to be servants to one another and to the world, the Church will be made new again—alive again.

It is really quite simple: there are no untouchables here. We are called simply to look for the face of Jesus in every person gathered here and then to use those same eyes to look for the face of Jesus in every person we meet this week. It doesn’t matter if we agree with them or not: we are called to serve them and love them. When and if we act out of that reality, the world will not only know that we are Christians by our love—but they’ll want in—and be all too eager to join us on *The Way*.