

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 he 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.”

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James and John, the Sons of Thunder. These two brothers, aware of the rising reputation of their teacher, want some of that honor for themselves. They are sure that Jesus is going to restore the nation’s political prominence. And they want a distinguished place when the 12 tribes once again begin exercising their sovereignty. These two blustering brothers are blindly ambitious, and brazenly sincere. On first impression, they remind me of an old John Prine song that tells about “a pretty nice fella, kinda confused, got muscles in his head that've never been used.”

To be fair, before the life, death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth, there had never been any alternative for them to consider. Their pipe-dreams are focused on a return to the only kind of political power that they have ever witnessed. With Jesus as king of a mighty nation consisting of the reunited tribes, James and John hope to share in the glory of an Israel restored to her former supremacy and enforced by the only powers they knew: domination, fear and death.

They are also asking for a little more power and prestige than the other ten in the glorious new empire they envision. James and John are, after all, already two of Jesus’ inner circle along with Peter and Mary Magdalene. Fortunately,

they are following *Jesus*, not Caesar. What Jesus anticipates is a prospect that is vastly different than anything the disciples could ever have imagined.

Jesus sees a future involving a cup of bitter sorrow that will become a glorious cup of salvation. And a baptism that will be an immersion in humiliation, abandonment and death that will drain death of its poison and set all creation free.

Immediately after his third description of what is coming, James and John made their naïve request to Jesus for greatness while they were on the road to Jerusalem. Jesus told them that the chief priests and scribes intended to condemn him to death and hand him over to the Roman government. "...they will mock [the Son of Man]," Jesus has said, "and spit upon him and flog him and kill him, and after three days he will rise again."

And still, the Sons of Thunder think they want to flank Jesus in glory. Jesus rightly tells them "You do not know what you are asking." In another week or two, two men *will* flank Jesus; though not James and not John. Instead, two criminals will be crucified, one on the left of Jesus and the other on his right. Eventually, James *will* die as a martyr, and John will drink the cup of bitter suffering down to the dregs as he suffers through the deaths of both his beloved friend, Jesus, and his brother, James, both executed as enemies of the Empire.

For any of his followers, joining Jesus in his self-offering is unpredictable except for one truth: the road ahead is not an unbroken, conflict-free rise to earthly prominence and unbridled powers of domination. Instead, though the details vary, joining Christ involves faithfully living in God and for God, no matter the consequences. In first century Palestine, those who were faithful to God's realm instead of the kingdom of Caesar were executed as enemies of the state.

The other disciples are irate with James and John. Now, maybe they were spiritually mature enough to recognize that the realm of heaven is not some compensation or reward that we earn for ourselves. More likely, they were more like me and you. If we are honest, we sometimes get angry when some other spiritual or social climber's impulsive act of self-importance outshines our own.

So, before we get too smug or self-righteous about James and John, we might do well to do a quick self-check. We, too, can replace a search to serve with a search for status; instead of holding each other in the most generous light and giving each other room to grow, we can find ourselves using our social positions to pressure others toward our own preferences.

Mark's Jesus implodes these natural inclinations in the two brothers and shatters illusions of splendor and prestige. "You know," Jesus reminds his followers, "that those who are supposed to rule the gentile peoples dominate them, and that their great men wield power over them."

You are aware, followers of Christ, that self-aggrandizement is the characteristic of the powers of empire. "But it is not so among you," Jesus says. It cannot be like that with us.

In wrapping up his explanation of greatness, true greatness that echoes and harmonizes with the grace of God, Jesus offers himself – his body, his life, all that he is – as our example. "For even the Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve and *give his soul* as the price of liberation for many."

Jesus gives himself freely, in willing faithfulness to his God-given nature as a representative of all humanity. "For the sake of many" sounds like an indefinite and exclusive number, but here and elsewhere in scripture it implies at least a suggestion of universality. Like standard English, ancient Hebrew had no plural word for "all," like "all ya'll."

Jesus fulfilled the image of God in his unique, authentic humanity. God's image strives to express itself the unique, authentic humanity of *every* person.

Jesus did not give his life as "as a ransom for many" to buy us back from either God or the devil. Jesus paid himself out to rescue us from our fascination with sociopolitical domination. To unchain us from the illusion that we are nothing but self-sufficient, independent, self-made men and women. Jesus gives his entire life, his self-sacrificing death and his liberating presence to challenge our assumptions about what is death-dealing and what is life-giving.

Jesus gives himself as the disorienting revelation of an unfamiliar reality, which is this: As we die to our identity as self-sufficient, self-created people by

giving ourselves in service and love, we find ourselves living more fully than ever before. As we die to our independent, isolated selves, we discover a liberating interdependence with all of creation in a world gripped by fear-filled self-preservation.

The unblocked flow of God's creation moves through us to accentuate and cultivate the universal human dignity that God gave each one of us and "all ya'll." Coming together for an hour each week to join Christ's self-offering in the Eucharist strengthens us to shoulder each other's burdens with compassion and generosity. The church as a manifestation of the body of Christ becomes a place to set down roots, make lifelong friends and serve others in meaningful and fulfilling ways. We become the antidote to the evaporating sense of close community and a haven for the loneliness that has so deeply invaded our society. We – each of us and all of us – need to feel needed.

That's how we become great.

Jesus is not ransoming us from an angry, spiteful God. Jesus is not paying off Satan as though the Creator couldn't overcome anything created, including the parasitical energy that seeks to destroy God's good world and the creatures bearing God's image. Jesus saves us from ourselves; from our smallness and pettiness. From our isolation and fear.

The pattern of Jesus' whole life runs contrary to fear-based pursuits of power and glory. James and John thought these came from positional authority, but Jesus pointed out a stunning alternative to them – to all his followers. Within every human heart there is humility and arrogance, respect for others and a desire to outshine them, a yearning to serve and a craving to be served. Jesus showed us which of these to follow.

We can choose to be slaves to the illusion that we can cheat death by acquiring status and power for ourselves. Or we can allow the sacrifice that Jesus made to liberate us from the deceptive and distracting fear of death so that we can willingly give of ourselves, not as a grab for power but as a gift of strength that makes all of us more whole, more joyful participants in God's blossoming peace. With God's help and the love of Christ, we *are* able.

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