

Sunday: Fifth Sunday in Lent

Date: March 21, 2021

Text: Mark 10:35-45

Title:

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

Please pray with me.

It's a dog-eat-dog world. A cliché I have heard since I was a child. If you are not pushing to get ahead, someone else will pass you by. They will take the advantage of every opportunity to get ahead of you and leave you behind. Others will get ahead while you linger in mediocrity.

In our culture, no one wants to be passed by. Whether it is in our workplace, competitive or recreational sports leagues, or video gaming. Competition even extends to the Costco parking lot, where we compete to get the space closest to the door. If I could just figure out how to get this competitive streak to translate to seating at church. What would it look like if everyone raced to get a seat in the front row.

It was a dog-eat-dog world even in Jesus' day. The Pharisees, scribes, chief priests and others were always jockeying for positions of influence among the Israelites. Perhaps Luke 18 comes to mind, the story of the Pharisee and the tax collector praying in the temple. The Pharisee patting himself on the back for not being as lowly as the tax collector. Jesus addresses this attitude in Matthew's gospel in Chapter 23

Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples, ²“The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses' seat, ³so do and observe whatever they tell you, but not the works they do. For they preach, but do not practice. ⁴They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on people's shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to move them with their finger. ⁵They do all their deeds to be seen by others. For they make their phylacteries broad and their fringes long, ⁶and they love the place of honor at feasts and the best seats in the synagogues ⁷and greetings in the marketplaces and being called rabbi by others. (Mathew 23:1-7)

This power-seeking attitude of the Pharisees and Jesus' indictment of it causes one to pause and wonder at the request of James and John, to sit in seats of authority and power in Jesus' kingdom. Before we lump the Sons of Thunder in with the arrogant and self-serving religious leaders of the day, we should explore their request in a little more depth.

Jesus has teaches his disciples and us, that the Father is willing to give us what we ask for. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says to them,

⁷“Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. ⁸For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened. (Matthew 7:7-8).

And in Matthew 21:21-22, Jesus tells the disciples

Truly, I say to you, if you have faith and do not doubt, you will not only do what has been done to the fig tree, but even if you say to this mountain, ‘Be taken up and thrown into the sea,’ it will happen.

²² And whatever you ask in prayer, you will receive, if you have faith.

James and John are asking Jesus, as part of the inner circle of Jesus' disciples, to be seated at places of honor when Jesus comes into his glory. In first century culture, the seats at the right hand and left hand of the master were considered to be the places of the closest advisers. The right hand was reserved for the one who was most trusted and the one seated at the left hand was considered a valued resource. The problem arises with their understanding of Jesus' glory in that it is slightly skewed. They are still stuck in this world. Their perception of Jesus' glory is a physical earthly kingdom, not the cross, tomb and resurrection.

It appears from the narrative of our text that James and John are asking, as they have been told to do, but their request seems a little like they are trying to step on Peter and the other disciples to gain some sort of advantage. But in reality, these two are really putting into words, the thoughts and desires of all of the disciples. They are an example of the desires of everyone who was following Jesus. They reflect Christendom still today.

This request and Jesus' response points out that there are limits to the willingness of God to grant every whim and desire of the human heart. Jesus responds to the brothers by pointing to who has the authority to grant their petition. Jesus does not have that authority; it is only something the Father can grant. Then

he delves into their request and informs them that they do not know what they are asking for.

As he points to the baptism he is baptized with, and the cup that he must drink from, he undoubtedly confuses the disciples. His response points to his true mission, which is not in alignment with their perceptions of his kingdom. As Jesus speaks of the cup, he is not talking of a festive beverage. He is talking to his allotment, his share, in the scheme of things. In the Old Testament, the cup is most often used in conjunction with the wrath of God. In Isaiah 53:17, the prophet speaks of removal of the cup of wrath from which the Israelites had drank because of their sin. In Luke's gospel, Jesus will pray to the Father in the Garden of Gethsemane asking "Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me. Nevertheless, not my will, but yours, be done."

When Jesus talks of drinking from the cup, he is referring to his destiny. Jesus will drink the full cup, his full allotment, as it were, which constitutes bearing God's wrathful judgment upon sin. We see this understanding contained in verse 45 of our Gospel reading today.

For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.

The allotment Jesus drinks from the cup is the allotted punishment for the sins of the whole world. It is Jesus taking the punishment for the sins we nailed to the cross on Ash Wednesday. He bears God's wrath for the sins we have committed and will commit now and in the future. In this way he ransoms us from the punishment we deserve.

I am pretty sure the disciples were not ready for that prophetic message from Jesus in response to the request for positions of honor when Jesus comes into his glory. They were wrapped up in the popularity Jesus was accruing. His healing ministry was the talk of the town. He was sought out everywhere he went. He was loved by the people and seen as the answer to decades, even centuries of subjugation and oppression. The idea that the Messiah would be an earthly ruler was a hard one to shake for the disciples. In fact, they will not truly understand it until after Jesus rises from the dead and connects the dots to his ministry, death, and resurrection with the disciples on the road to Emmaus.

In responding to James and John's request, Jesus speaks of the moment in time when those who were chosen by the Father to be at his right hand and his left hand

will be seen. The time of Jesus glory is when he is lifted up on the cross. As Jesus is lifted up on the cross, two thieves will be crucified at the same time. One thief on his right and one thief on his left. As Jesus is numbered with the transgressors, he fulfills God's plan of salvation. In his glory, he bears the wrath of God as well as the ridicule of man. He is a man who is tortured by the Creator and the created, abandoned by God and rejected by the religious authorities of the day. These two thieves demonstrate the response to the gift of salvation offered to all mankind. One receives the gift of faith and salvation and is told he will be with Jesus in paradise that very day. The other rejects the Holy Spirit's work and dies a lost and condemned creature.

The response of our Lord demonstrates that the requests made to the Father will be granted if they are in the will of God, and in the best interest of the requestor. He is not a fairytale God mother or a genie in a magic lamp. Our Father, in an abundance of love for us, does not grant every one of our wishes. Instead, he protects us from the foolish things we that will actually hurt us and put our faith at risk.

Just as Jesus pointed James and John to the cross and his death, so too the Father points us to cross of Christ in our requests. It is through the cross, through Jesus our intercessor, through the great high priest that our prayers come before the Almighty.

It is through Christ that the blessings of God come to us. It is in Christ we have our identity and our place in the kingdom of heaven. We need not strive for places of honor in the kingdom. We are not looking for glory and honor among men. We do not have to step on others in this dog-eat-dog world for our worth or our salvation. In Christ all that we need to do, is done for us. In the cross, we are lifted up with him. In Jesus' death and resurrection our salvation was bought and paid for, as the wrath of God was poured out on His sinless Son. We reap the benefits of this atoning sacrifice. By the power of the Holy Spirit we share a seat at the table with our Lord just as the converted thief on the cross. At our death we will be in paradise with our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Our joy and our value is not in what we do or where we sit, but in our baptism. As Paul says in Romans 6

Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised

from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his.

To give us assurance of where we stand in the kingdom, Jesus instituted the sacrament of Holy Communion. In this precious meal, we are given the true body and true blood of Jesus for the forgiveness of our sins and the assurance of our salvation. We need not ask for a place of honor in the Jesus' kingdom. All places are places of honor and glory, joy and fulfillment. In Christ we are all treasured members of the family of God. In our bodily resurrection, when Christ returns, we will be raised up to live with him in His kingdom, sharing in the wedding feast of the Lamb. In a celebration that will last into eternity.

Amen.