

## The Best Seats in the House

sermon digest

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Mark 10:32-45

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For the third time Jesus announced to his disciples that they were going to Jerusalem where “the Son of Man” will be arrested, condemned, mocked, flogged, and killed; “and after three days he will rise again.” This time the sons of Zebedee, James and John, stepped up to the plate with a simple request, “Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory.” In other words, “When you become king of the universe, give us the best seats in the house.” Like most of us, they heard what they wanted to hear. They were deaf to the word about suffering and death. They were only interested in the glory part. Matthew’s Gospel attempted to rescue James and John by transferring the request to an overly ambitious mother, but Mark is brutally honest about the human failures of the disciples themselves. Mark is probably right. The problem is not about Mom; the character flaw present in most of humanity belonged to James and John. The other disciples protested with anger. Perhaps they protested too much. Were they angry at the power grab of James and John or angry that they were beat to the punch? I suspect that James and John were heard seeking seats of privilege and authority that each of the Twelve thought belonged to him. Jesus addressed the final lesson not just to James and John, but to all of his disciples: “whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all.”

***Aspiring to greatness is a common human dream.*** Shortly after the 2011 dedication of the Martin Luther King, Jr., Memorial in D.C. complaints began to be registered about the citation at the base of King’s statue. The paraphrase from a sermon reads: “I was a drum major for justice, peace, and righteousness.” Poet Maya Angelou said that the abbreviation makes Dr. King look like “an arrogant twit.” The inscription will be removed primarily because of the distortion of King’s actual words.

King’s sermon from Mark’s Gospel on the request of James and John for the seats of authority in the Kingdom was about the natural human instinct in all of us to aspire to greatness, to be the drum major leading the parade; but Jesus called us to service not to privilege. King delivered his sermon “The Drum Major Instinct” at Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta two months before his death. Like Jesus, he seemed to have a premonition about the end of his life. Two months before he was murdered in Memphis, King requested that his own funeral focus not on his Nobel Peace Prize and hundreds of awards but on his life of service: “I’d like somebody to mention that day that Martin Luther King, Jr., tried to give his life serving others.” He concluded, “Yes, Jesus, I want to be on your right or your best side, not for any selfish reason. . . . I just want to be there in love and in justice and in truth and in commitment to others.”

By the time King spoke in Atlanta it was too late to hide his accomplishments. He was already the drum major leading the parade to peace and justice and righteousness. The world could not ignore his Nobel Prize or the foundation he had laid for social revolution in America. But also no one could ignore his identity with his rejected race, his participation in marches exposing injustice, and his time in southern jails. A lot of folks would like to be remembered along with great presidents of this country with a statue in the Capitol City, but most of us would not want to risk our lives or endure the pain that leads to the prize. We want to own the Purple Heart of honor, but we don’t want to pay for it with our own blood.

Paul Waddell probably called it right when he wrote that all of us live as Jesus said, “among the gentiles.” We enjoy lording it over others, and there is something of the tyrant in all of us (*Christian Century*, Oct 6, 2009, p. 19). While we complain about the one per cent of Americans who live at the top of the heap or the 400 Americans who own half the wealth, most of us would rather join them than depose them. The lust for power is not the private trait of a few people at the top. The primary difference about our station in life is not about what we or they deserve. We may only be separated by opportunity—being in the right place at the right time with the right ambition. Getting the best seats may also be about audacity and drive. Unless you step to the front you will remain at the back of the pack. Did not Jesus invite us to success in the offer, “Ask, and it will be given to you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you” (Luke 11:9)? That is the mantra of the prosperity gospel proclaimed by the

wealthy, megachurch movement today. The only difference between James and John and the others was their audacity in asking. Were they not invited to ask for the best seats in the house?

***The path to glory is narrow, steep, and painful.*** The statement has been attributed to the African-American jazz composer Tom Delaney: “Everybody wants to go to heaven, but nobody wants to die.” The thought is resident in the dialogue of Jesus and the sons of Zebedee. We might be surprised to detect an absence of condemnation here from Jesus. From where we stand along with the attitude of their peers, they deserved a good thrashing for their unbridled ambition. Rather than condemn the question Jesus was patient with their lack of understanding and asked, “Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?” The cup and baptism would eventually be understood by the church as cup of suffering and baptism of death and burial, but Mark is concerned to present the disciples before the cross, not after. Until they experienced for themselves, they had no earthly idea that Jesus was about to be crucified and certainly no hint that the cross was his way to glory. They certainly wanted the best seats in the house of glory; but like all the rest of us, they did not want to die.

Former pastor of the First Methodist Church in Oak Ridge and later bishop spoke of a “call to downward mobility” (*Christian Century*, Oct 8, 1997, p 869). Carder noted that Jesus called his disciples to a downward mobility, seeking the places of service rather than places of authority and power.

You remember the acrostic classification of the early 1980's, the YUPPIes: young, upwardly-mobile professionals. Both the economic trend of the day and the formula for success lent them to aspire to a level of success beyond the wildest imagination of most of their parents. Those were the days when every generation expected to make more, to own more, and to be more than their parents. Success was measured in dollars and the goal was to reach the top. I strongly suspect that the attitudes fostered in the seventies have created the economic problems of our century. Carder cites Henri Nouwen's interpretation of the Fall. Ever since the serpent tempted Eve and Adam with the enticement of being like God, we have been tempted to replace love with power.

Actually ambition is not a four-letter word, and failure is not the goal of the Kingdom of God. James and John did not need to abandon their aspiration to reach the top; they just needed to correct their understanding of success and the way to get there. Jesus preferred to redirect and baptize their drive for success rather than destroy it. The root problem is the measure of success. A wrongheaded idea of the top moves in the wrong direction.

In 1995, we made a trip to Japan to visit with our son's family and to meet our newborn granddaughter. A funny thing happened on the way from the airport. We stopped for gas. I am not sure whether the fuel was low or our son just wanted us to experience a Japanese service station. After thirteen hours in the air, we were not too excited about sampling the culture, but the fuel stop turned out to be an experience to remember. Before the car came to a full stop, an attendant began to clean the windshield, while a second began to work on the rear glass. A third received instructions from the driver and began to pump gas, while a fourth motioned for the hood to be released and proceeded to check fluid levels. When the tank was full, the attendant graciously announced the total bill and literally ran the money to the cashier and back to the car with change. Just when I thought that the show was over, two attendants ran into the street to hold traffic in each direction, while a second stood beside the car motioning a safe passage. As we drove into the night, the entire crew stood on the driveway waving goodbye.

The funny thing about this strange experience of a real “service station” is in the misplaced priority of our time. Like James and John most of us understand service as “serve us.” We are looking for the place in life where we are surrounded by people rushing to satisfy our every need or want. Jesus simply called his disciples to look in another direction. Find the place of genuine love, where you can meet people at their greatest need rather than your highest want. Then without regard to the implications about your station in life, give yourself in service to others. “For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.”