

The Best Seat in the House
Mark 10:35-45
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I've lived in three major cities in my life...Houston, Atlanta, and Chicago... I've driven in each of those cities for many years...and I have observed something.....

The bad drivers in each city are, in my experience anyway, different...

In Chicago, bad drivers drive like there is no one else on the road...and everyone else has to react and respond to protect themselves.

In Atlanta, bad drivers seem to be, well, ignorant...you'll see people exit from the fast lane cutting all the way across five lanes...or they will back up on the interstate to catch a missed exit...It's all sort of quaint, but dangerous.

And then there is Houston, where bad drivers have to win....they are almost as aggressive as drivers in Paris....they pass you just to pass you...they cut you off for no reason other than you are ahead of them...and that's what I'll call aggressive vehicular ambition... well...statistically, it makes Houston twice as deadly to drive in as Chicago...twice as deadly.

Today with Jesus we confront ambition. Specifically James' and John's ambition to be co-Vice Presidents when Jesus assumes the top spot in this new kingdom that he's about to bring in.

It's almost funny; you can almost see Jesus turning to them, with a bewildered expression straight out of a sitcom, and sighing and shaking his head...

But then, because he is a teacher and not a sitcom character...Jesus responds..."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?"

And still they don't get it..."Bring it on! We can take it," they say...

And so Jesus grants them what they want...not the prestige...but the right to drink of the same cup he will drink...and the story isn't funny anymore...

Standing at this point of history...we know the cup that Jesus will drink...we know that the baptism that he faces is a traitor's cross...and we know...at least so the story goes...that James will be a martyr of the faith and John, according to tradition anyway, will be the only one of the 12 disciples who doesn't die as a result of his following Jesus. One of the first to go and the one who will have to see and know that all of his brother disciples have died because of what they believe and who they follow. Not funny at all. But back to that scene on the road...where the disciples don't know what is coming...so the teacher provide more explanation...

"In all the world around us...people with power lord it over others...people with power put others in their places...in the kingdoms of this world, the tyranny of power and wealth and prestige reign...but not for YOU. In the world you want to be a part of...it doesn't work that way...the one who would be great, must be a...slave OF ALL..."

And suddenly no-one is laughing, especially today...but then too...Goofy James and John sit silently...because it's finally starting to sink in...SLAVES?

What does he mean? We have to be slaves...not slaves to him...not slaves to God...but slaves to all...

It is at this point that I struggle as most ministers do...What to say about this? We are to be slaves? Is that an invitation for me to say we should all do more? Well, I'll tell you...there are some people here who already do an awful lot...and if they aren't sitting next to you...then they probably are you...So maybe this is to be encouragement for those who already do more...that what you are doing is following Jesus...But that's not quite enough Good News for me...Because it doesn't take us to the heart of this invitation...

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. suggested that the center of this invitation is surrender...surrender of what he called the Drum Major Instinct, the desire for attention, or to get ahead, to prove ourselves. Dr. King suggested that racism, and indeed most -isms out there...grow out of the drum major instinct...a need that some people have to feel superior...a need that some people have to feel that they are first.

It's the shadow side of ambition. It's why I say that ambition is like the beautiful purple flower Belladonna...it contains within it a chemical compound

that is used in hundreds of lifesaving and life improving compounds...like emergency inhalers for asthma and treatments for epilepsy and tremors...But in large doses...even eating one flower...it is deadly. And so it is with Ambition. It can inspire us to do our best...and it can, very literally, kill us.

Dr. King recognized that...that the desire to be the best instead of doing your best meant someone else had to be on the bottom...and race was as good a reason as any other to keep someone down, he said. King went onto note that "this perverted use of the drum major instinct...has led to the most tragic prejudice, the most tragic expressions of man's inhumanity to man."

Think about it for a moment...Hitler proposed the superiority of the Aryan race as a way to solidify his rule...and exterminated seven million people...not to mention the millions who died in the war to stop him....The belief in manifest destiny...that it was God's will for white Europeans to dominate North America led to the subjugation and killing of millions of Native Americans...It is the demonization of the OTHER that motivates Sectarian violence around the world ...especially these days in Syria, Iraq and Turkey. When we have to have the best seat in the house...we become less than human...because we make those we label "less than"...too often less than human.

I find it remarkable that Jesus answers James and John not with a strong rebuke, but the facts, for he seems to understand that they really did want to be a part of his kingdom work—they just wanted to do it as Jesus' captains. He answers them flipping the Drum Major Instinct from one that promotes self, into one that serves others. Jesus instructs them not to use power to control others, but to use it to serve and lift up others.

But there is something else here as well...Jesus is saying something very powerful about what it means to be one of his followers...a truth that largely eluded the church for the 1700 years that earthly power and the church were hand in hand...It's a truth as the church wains in influence in culture that we can see afresh.

Our reason for being is not to be the most well-known or beloved congregation on the North Shore. Rather it is to serve...to be slaves for the world....not slaves of the world...for we serve no master but the God who made us...but by offering ourselves for the world...just as Jesus offered himself...we join with the Spirit of God already at work, changing the

destructive patterns and behaviors of our world as we use all our gifts, powers, and resources daily serving and lifting up others.

Retired Methodist Bishop and Dean of the Chapel at Duke Divinity School, Will Willimon, suggests that this is a message that contemporary followers of Jesus have been reluctant to proclaim to the world, perhaps because we are too uncomfortable with it ourselves. We are independent self-actualized people. We will be slaves to no one...but as Willimon points out...this is not about empowering those who would exploit us...this is about following the loving, self-sacrificial example of Jesus. And as Willimon notes, "Jesus is not a technique for getting what we want out of God; Jesus is God's way of getting what God wants out of us. God wants a world, a world redeemed, restored...And the way God gets that is with ordinary people like us who are willing to walk like Jesus, talk like Jesus, yes, and even if need be to suffer like Jesus."

Dr. King concludes his sermon suggesting that we reimagine our drum major desires away from ourselves...to seek instead to be drum majors, in his words, "for justice...for peace...for righteousness."

"Yes, Jesus, I want to be on your right or your left side, ...not for any selfish reason. I want to be on your right or your left side, not in terms of some political kingdom or ambition. But I just want to be there in love and in justice and in truth and in commitment to others, so that we can make of this old world a new world."

The invitation to slavery...not slavery to one class or one way of life, but slavery to all...is an invitation to participate in our own salvation...saved from the belladonna poison of worldly ambition...FOR the transformation of the world...

And the best news is that the one who was the first slave for all has already made that salvation real...has made the servant's cup not simply a cup of sacrifice, but a cup of joy—not just at that table—but every day. Thanks be to God.