



SERMON OF THE WEEK

First Presbyterian Church of Honolulu

January 7, 2007

The Rev. Jim Miller

“Anything You Want” - Mark 10:35-45

Mark 10:35 - Then James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came to him. "Teacher," they said, "we want you to do for us whatever we ask."

36 - "What do you want me to do for you?" he asked.

37 - They replied, "Let one of us sit at your right and the other at your left in your glory."

38 - "You don't know what you are asking," Jesus said. "Can you drink the cup I drink or be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with?"

39 - "We can," they answered. Jesus said to them, "You will drink the cup I drink and be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with,

40 - but to sit at my right or left is not for me to grant. These places belong to those for whom they have been prepared."

41 - When the ten heard about this, they became indignant with James and

John.

42 - Jesus called them together and said, "You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise

authority over them.

43 - Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant,

44 - and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all.

45 - For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."

It's not hard to find people who are willing and eager to sit at the right hand of Jesus. As I watch with only a mild interest the political candidates line themselves up for the next Presidential contest, they are all making sure that at least one chapter of their autobiographical memoirs is dedicated to faith and religion. Somehow, word is going

around that you're more likely to be elected if Jesus is your right hand man.

Our current President, you'll recall, when interviewed in an early round of debates and asked to name his favorite philosopher, said, "Jesus".

This goes far back before our day. In 313AD, Emperor Constantine of the Roman Empire first made Christianity protected by the state in his Edict of Milan, stating essentially that

Christians should be allowed to worship as they want, so that whatever God might be up there would look kindly on the rulers. If you read it, it sounds like he's hedging on his bets. Of course, his mom had become a Christian, so he had more than an Empire to please.

Napoleon Bonaparte himself observed the importance of having God on your side when he said, "Well then, I will tell you. Alexander, Caesar, Charlemagne and I myself have founded great empires; but upon what did these creations of our genius depend?

pon force. Jesus alone founded His empire upon love, and to this very day millions will die for Him. . ."

In today's text, James and John, two disciples who have traveled with Jesus, have the makings of amateur politicians. They pull him aside for a caucus, presenting a bill that they would have Jesus pass into law.

I can hear John say, "I defer the remainder of my two minutes to my brother," and James saying, "Thank you, Sir. On behalf of my family, we ask that we could sit at your right and your left."

Later, the other disciples are angry—most likely because they didn't think of it first.

Jesus' response is curious.

For such a flattering request, He tells them that they don't even know what they're asking for. Because so many of our prayers are requests, there is good reason to consider what they thought they were requesting, and what God heard instead.

The Approach

You have to laugh at the way they ask. "Teacher," they said, "we want you to do for us whatever we ask."

I have to confess that I know exactly what they're doing because I'm an associate pastor. And when you're an associate pastor, there are a number of different channels

you need to go through to get things done.

So sometimes I go to Pastor Dan and I say, "Okay, I need to ask you for some-thing, but I'm going to tell you how I want you to listen to it. I don't want you to listen to it like a logical, rational, level-headed business manager. I want you to listen to it with the generous, over-abundant, unhesitating, never-failing love of the eternal Father who gives better gifts to his children than they could ask or imagine.....or just like Santa would be fine."

And Dan will say, "What do you want?"

And I'll say, "No! No! No! You have to promise first!!!"

So I understand what James and John are doing.

The Request

They ask, "Let one of us sit at your right and the other at your left in your glory." The word for "glory" in Greek is "doxa." It's where we get the word "doxology," which means, "speaking praise" as when we

sing "Praise God from whom all blessings flow...." We give glory to God.

They are trying to co-opt Jesus for a cause, and they have something specific in mind when they think Jesus is headed for doxa, for glory.

I've mentioned before that there were two important

levels of hierarchy of which the first century Jews were aware. Jesus addresses this, basically calling them on the people they're admiring, when He says, "You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them."

So there are rulers and high officials. The rulers are the Caesars, the Emperors of Rome. Augustus Caesar was the one we talk about in the Christmas story, who called the census that made Joseph have to go to Bethlehem. He died in 14AD and was replaced by Tiberius Caesar. Tiberius ruled during Jesus' ministry and would have appointed Pontius Pilate, who would hand Jesus over to be crucified.

The high officials are probably the Herods, those who are appointed by Caesar to rule specifically over a small corner of the Roman Empire known as Judea. Herod the Great was the one who had the two-year-old boys executed when the wise men told him a king had been born to the Jews. His three sons, also called Herod, ruled during Jesus' ministry.

So when James and John say "doxa," they are talking about the glory they saw of the other kings. Remember, they believed Jesus was there to replace Herod, born King of the Jews. All they had to consider was the

change in their pockets.

Herod Philip, one of the sons of Herod the Great, minted coins with the image of his boss, Caesar Augustus that said, "He who deserves adoration." He who deserves "doxa."

So here is what they're really asking: "Jesus, when you are at last king again, when we Jewish people rule over our own land without answering to these unclean, Gentile Romans, who have no right to Jerusalem and Israel, the land God has chosen for our people, when you are king, then we want to be your...VP and Secretary of State."

Keep in mind, in the passage just before this one, verses 32-34, Jesus has announced that they are going to go to Jerusalem, and though He will be betrayed by these Gentiles, He will rise. They must think He means rise to power. The rest of Mark is headed towards Jerusalem. They are ready for glory.

Application

Now let me pause to ask you, before we shake a finger at the brothers, have you ever asked in one way or another to be at Jesus' right hand?

Have you ever used God?...

1. to comfort yourself with thoughts of divine revenge on people have hurt you, or
2. tried to barter with God for the health of someone you loved who was sick by promising to be more obedient, or
3. in some way or another tried to be close to God so that when it all came down, you might benefit or share in a reward?

4. Be careful what you ask for. Getting close to Jesus may

ngan something different than you expect.

Having worked in youth ministry for a decade, I know a lot of youth ministers. I know a guy who went into youth ministry wanting to be a celebrity to a bunch of teen-agers, wanting to be a hero. It scratched an itch that he had somewhere between his rib cage and his ego.

In his first year of ministry, he took them all down to Mexico on a mission trip like the ones that we go on with our youth in the summers, building houses for the poor. Except his group's project was different than ours. They stayed in an orphanage and worked there.

On the first night he was there, these American teens discovered that the toilets didn't work quite so well down south of the border, and one of them got entirely clogged in the way toilets get clogged.

He called out in front of the group, "Who's going to unclog this toilet?"

When there were no volunteers, a sad reality dawned on him: that he was a leader of a Christian group and an example. So he volunteered himself, and even with kids making fun of him for having to do it, he went to plunge a dirty toilet.

He sat there over the toilet, sweating, telling himself, "This isn't what I signed up for." And he said he felt God tell him at that point, "Yes you did."

Jesus' Answer

Jesus turns their longing for doxa on its head. "Can you drink the cup I drink?" Just before He was crucified, in the garden of Gethsemane Jesus prayed, "Father, if it is possible, take this cup away from

me."

He's asking if they can handle the same cup of suffering.

"Can you be baptized with the same baptism I am baptized with?"

Baptism, remember, they knew from John the Baptist, who had his disciples go out into the river alone, lay down in the water, and let it cover and swallow their entire bodies. Their belief was that their old personality was dying, disappearing under the water.

He's asking if they can die with Him.

"You don't know what you're asking," He says because, you remember, the two who end up on his right and left are thieves crucified with Him.

Jesus' glory will look like shame in the end.

The Kingdom

James and John are asking for power when they ask for doxa.

Jesus tells them, "You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them."

Not so with you.

Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your attendant, and whoever wants to be first must be servant of all."

James and John, you see kingdoms around you where big bullies pick on the little bullies, and the little bullies pick on you. You're trying to get to the top of the heap so you can be in charge. Ironically, you're becoming exactly what you hate about Herod and Caesar.

Jesus says, I'm not here to create another one of those kind of kingdoms, guys. I want to invite you to a different kind of kingdom. I want to invite you to a kingdom:

Where love expressed through service, is more important than power. That's true glory.

Where when the toilet needs to be cleaned, YOU clean it, because you love them enough to do it for them. That's true glory.

Where God's name does not get used in vain by people who are only trying to get elected, because I am not about taking power.

Instead, a kingdom where you may get bullied, and you don't hit back, because you'd rather convert them than conquer them. That's true glory.

I want so much for you to find a place at this church. I want you to be a part of the story that lasts forever, and not just be a Christmas decoration that shows up at church once a year. And I want so much for you to know that your doubts and fears do not make you less of a Christian.

But now I have to warn you, the kingdom Jesus is inviting us to is not a kingdom of pride and importance, and not of money and fame.

The only promises I can make you, is that bullies don't get to be a part of this kingdom. Especially the religious bullies, the worst kind. And this kingdom is the one that's going to win in the end and last forever. But we're going to have to serve our way there.

And as a final example of this, Jesus picked up a towel. He picked up a towel and a bucket and a servant's job, and at the Last Supper, when He shared

Jhis meal we share today, He washed the disciples feet.

He said, *“Do you understand what I have done for you?” Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet. I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you. And if you do this, you will be blessed.*”

James got it. It says that as he and the disciples spread their ministry throughout the world, Herod took him and had him put to death with the sword. (Acts 12) James served to the end.

John got it. He writes in the New Testament, “This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters.” (1 John 3:16)

If you get it, serve the world. Let them see us love the way no one else does. That's true glory.

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Note: The Rev. Jim Miller is an associate pastor at First Presbyterian Church of Honolulu. This sermon may also be heard on our website at: www.fpchawaii.org