

Servant Power

Mark 10: 32-45

He took the twelve aside again and began to tell them what was to happen to him, saying, "See, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be handed over to the chief priests and the scribes, and they will condemn him to death; then they will hand him over to the Gentiles; they will mock him, and spit upon him, and flog him, and kill him; and after three days he will rise again." James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came forward to him 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.⁴³ 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.⁴⁵ For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many."

Have you noticed? There is a certain amount of political electricity in the air these days. As midterms creep closer, we read a lot of endorsements for favored candidates in the newspaper. We hear about Air Force One hopping around to vulnerable states where the president needs to campaign so his party can cling to their power. Meanwhile, the other side campaigns to try and regain the power positions they lost. We watch as both sides try to prop themselves up to the top. Notice their logic is the same: get my person into the power seat and the power will trickle down. In our bibles, we see that James and John have the same logic. They are lobbying for a privileged position in Jesus' cabinet. As they make the turn toward Jerusalem, they can smell the Kingdom of God about to become a reality, so they say: "Teacher, we want you to do whatever we ask. Put one of us on your right side, the other on your left, in your glory."

As we begin we admit, it's how our world works: we live in a top-down power system. We vote leaders into power positions to do what we ask, hoping it will trickle down to the rest of us. We invest in their ideologies. We defend their behaviors. We may even slap their campaign slogans on our cars. James and John have invested in propping Jesus to the top because Jesus as a political figure would change things, yes? Imagine all the sick people who would be able to

acquire decent health care. Imagine all the demonic forces of racism and sexism and phobias finally being cast out of our political and religious institutions. Imagine the defense budget slashed and tax dollars rerouted toward watering food deserts in the poorest neighborhoods. It's God's vision, after all: where jail cells are empty and schools are full. Wasn't it President Eisenhower who once said, "What a glorious day it will be when schools have everything they need, and it's the Air Force that needs to have a bake sale to buy a bomber jet." What a glorious day indeed! Well, it could happen if Jesus was the one in charge! Vote for Jesus and justice will roll down like water and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream. "We want to be with you, in your glory" James and John say. It's how it works. Get the right people into power and hopefully it will trickle down to the rest of us.

Except, the disciples aren't listening to what Jesus says is about to happen to him. If we're honest, we probably aren't listening either. It's part of the charm of Mark's gospel. The disciples never fully get it. Their heads are too busy swimming with delusions of grandeur. [Experiment: One side of the room will say, "We want to be with you when you come into your kingdom." The other side will say, "Jerusalem is the end of the road."] Three times Jesus tries to tell them, "Jerusalem is the end of the road!" But the disciples keep saying, "We want to be with you when you come into your kingdom!" How do they not hear it? How do we not hear it?

You see, in Mark's account Jesus is given two titles. Both show up in the very first verse of his gospel and are threaded throughout the rest of Mark's account. The first verse says, "The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ the Son of God." Did you hear it? Jesus is called both "Christ"—the anointed one—and he is called "the Son of God"—the one who suffers for us. Both titles are woven throughout the gospel. For example, when Jesus asks the disciples, "Who do you say that I am?" Peter responds, "You are the Messiah." But Peter is only half correct in his proclamation. So Jesus tries to draw them the whole picture by mentioning that the "Son of Man" must suffer because Jesus is not just the Messiah who reigns, but the "Son of God" who suffers. The same thing happens at the end of the gospel too. After the chief priests and scribes arrest Jesus, they question him by asking, "Are you the Messiah?" Jesus responds, "I am." "Blasphemy!" they reply. So they pass him onto the political leaders who torture and hang him on a piece of lumber. And as Jesus breathes his final breath, it says that a centurion soldier standing under the cross, looks up at Jesus and says, "Truly this is the Son of God." Both are who Jesus is. But the disciples are so focused on the power of the promised Messiah, they completely lose sight of what God's power looks like! How could they not hear what Jesus was telling them? How do we still not hear him today?

"We want to be with you in your glory!"

"But Jerusalem is the end of the road."

Listen, Jesus lays his type of power out there for us to grasp: “If you want to be great in my kingdom, you will become a servant of all. For the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve.” God’s power looks like service not from the top-down, but from the bottom-up.

A couple weeks ago we were worshiping at El Buen Pastor for World Communion Sunday. At the end of the service, their pastor, Alfredo, said something to them in Spanish. My Spanish is poor so all I could make out was when he said the word, “Trinity.” After the benediction I packed up my things, dropped them off in the car and finally migrated into their fellowship hall for a meal. When I got there I noticed all the members of El Buen Pastor were sitting down at the tables, but they had no food in front of them yet. As we were heading through the line I asked the woman who was serving tostadas why no one from El Buen Pastor had eaten yet. She said that Alfredo had told them to wait for every person from “Trinity” to be served first. It is what the church does, serves others first. We forget sometimes that service is what God’s power looks like. We forget service is what God’s love looks like. Service is what God’s church looks like. Not from the power flowing down from the top, but from the bottom-up!

It looks like Julie Sugg and friends who put together a meal for the CROP walkers and then invited all of us—don’t forget to tell her thank you.

It looks like Robert Alford who goes grocery shopping so we have snacks for fellowship time after worship—don’t forget to tell him thank you.

It looks like Janice Pursley who runs out last minute to the store just before service begins to buy grape juice because we ran out on a communion Sunday.

It looks like Margaret Elliot who has baked our communion bread for 20 years—don’t forget to tell them thank you.

It looks like Ann Williams who pulls our stubborn weeds and Johnnie Midyette who stays awake at night crunching our numbers.

It looks like Sue Baker taking our blood pressure and our choir and string-led musicians who leads us in song.

It looks like Jeanne Patterson who waters our indoor flowers every Tuesday and Alan Cameron who sets our thermometers so we have cool air in the summer and warm air in the winter.

It looks like our elders who listen to God’s vision for this church and who pray for you.

It looks like our Sunday school teachers who creatively engage our children so the stories of our faith get passed down to the next generation after we are gone—don’t forget to tell them thank you.

It looks like all of you who give of your time and energy to help make Trinity who she is; it’s a servant’s power that flows not from the top down, but from the bottom up; and whether we believe it or not, it’s the kind of power that transforms this world—so I say thank you.

According to the gospel, we know the highest place Jesus will occupy isn't on a throne, but on a cross. Those who will be on his left side and right when he comes into his glory aren't James and John, but two bandits who are hung beside him. The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve. He is still serving us with his power and love to help transform our world. He is still offering himself as a servant for all of us. Let's not forget to tell him thank you.