

When you look at our gospel reading you can't help but wonder how thick headed and bold James and John must have been. They just walk up to Jesus and say, "Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you." There might be centuries of time between us and them and loads of cultural differences, but no way was that a reasonable request. How is Jesus supposed to respond to that?!? ..."Okay guys, I'll give you whatever you want"?

There's actually a sinister parallel that our gospel writer Mark wants us to make. We're in Chapter 10 and the parallel happens in Chapter 6. You'll remember it well. It's the scene of Herod's birthday party and his step-daughter provides entertainment in the form of a dance that would certainly lead to a host of criminal charges these days. After the "dance" Herod says to her, "Ask me for whatever you wish, and I will give it." (When you put the request of James and John in the same category as King Herod it kind of makes you wish you weren't sitting in a church named "St. John's"!)

Audacious as their request is, there is a motive behind it that is common to most people - the motive to get ahead.

Perhaps we don't stop people on the sidewalk and say, "Fellow pedestrian, I want you to do for me whatever I ask of you," but we do want to get ahead. We may even subtly plot and scheme to get there.

I'm reminded of my time working as a bridge inspector. The company had just finished designing a large bridge in Michigan. We were transitioning to oversee the bridge's construction and three guys in the inspection division were to be relocated to the construction site for a period of two years. One of the three was an associate in the inspection division. One was the oldest and most experienced inspector we had; who was nearing retirement. And that left one more spot, which went to a guy in his early 30's who was a thorough inspector and a good climber.

This third pick was a cause of concern for the guy who worked in the cubicle next to mine. He was in his mid-forties, had a family, and was on a career trajectory that one day could very well land him a position as an associate. He was unhappy about not being chosen. The young guy would get all sorts of experience seeing a large new bridge go from ground-breaking to completion. He'd be making contacts with construction companies and all sorts of other engineering firms. Meanwhile the older guy would be stuck in the main office doing routine inspections

and writing mundane reports. When it came to being in line to be an associate who would it be - the dynamic, broadly experienced and well connected guy, or the guy who did nothing but routine stuff with the long-established accounts? He was debating if he should start to look for a new job - one with advancement possibilities.

Was he seeking glory as bluntly and boldly as James and John? No. But he was basically doing the same thing - strategizing for how he could get ahead. You may find yourself reflected in that. If you've ever stuck with a job, not because you feel God calling you to do it, or because it is particularly fulfilling to you, but because there is great potential for promotion; or if you've made a lateral move because a different department or division has more opportunity than yours, your motives haven't been all that different than James and John's. The worst thing that could happen is to have a boss who is only a couple years older - or perhaps a boss who is younger. That will perpetually kill any hope you have for real advancement. By the time he or she does actually retire you'll be considered too old for the job.

On one hand our American ideals of being upwardly mobile and getting ahead are commendable; they encourage productivity

and innovation. On the other hand they are horrible. You probably know very well that if you don't constantly work and strain to move forward you're going to slip backward. Not too many Sundays ago I preached about social pressures to be a certain way and have a certain level of success. Jesus' instructions to his disciples, and to us, would save us from that.

Indeed James and John were wrong to scheme to get status and honor. Jesus calls them on it. But at a deeper level Jesus' teaching would save us from exhausting ourselves pursuing human grandeur that really accomplishes nothing.

When Jesus says, "...whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all." He is not using reverse psychology. He is not saying the harder you serve the more glory God will give you. I believe some churches preach that. Not so. Jesus would free you from all traps of personal glory so that you can most fully and authentically be who God made you to be. That is not dependent upon other people's opinions of you. That is not measured by human levels of prestige and power. All of that is falsehood that tears down what God made in us.

I find it easy to get so wrapped up in the fears and worries of daily life that we become completely blind to what God is really up to, and in fact who God really is. Last week I had to travel to Philadelphia for a couple days to do interviews with a couple of our students who are in the process of becoming pastors. Two of the candidates had superb essays and some superb thoughts that they said I could share with you.

One is from John Medwid who quotes 14<sup>th</sup> Century mystic Meister Eckhart when he says, "What does God do all day long? God gives birth. From all eternity God lies on a maternity bed giving birth." Medwid goes on to say, "This is the God who walks with us on the journey of life and who never ceases to invite us to realize our immense potential and to become the most authentic persons that we can be. This is the God who has given me life and who has ceaselessly invited me to give birth to my best self." (Fr. John Medwid, Entrance Essay, Pg. 1)

And another thought from Adam Reinhardt whose thoughts are built upon the writings of the great Lutheran theologian Paul Tillich, "I do not believe that God is a thing, a person or a being. God is not a thing, as if he could be pointed to in a certain space, or even a thing circumscribed throughout all spaces. But God is not nothing. God is not a he, a she, or an

it. But God is. God is not a being as one among other beings, not the greatest among beings, not even an infinitely great being. God is not a supreme being, but rather God *is* supreme being itself. God *is* ultimate being, the ground and source, the grand foundation of all being, the fount and wellspring of all that is. God is the very infinite and transcendent depth of existence." (Adam Reinhardt, Endorsement Essay, Pg. 5)

Those thoughts may make your head spin. That's okay. These guys have years of theological training under their belts to develop these thoughts, and it's what we expect from our pastors-in-training. My whole point is this: Jesus didn't teach James and John and the rest of the disciples about servanthood and humility in order to condemn them or judge them. He taught them what he taught them so that nothing - nothing at all - would get in the way of the fullness of life that relationship with God makes possible.

God is the creative and grand foundation of all being. And God wants you to experience fullness of being, unfettered by all stupid human endeavors of greatness. Though tempting, they will take you nowhere. God who created you, and God alone, knows you fully. And God alone can make you whole. Never settle for anything less. Amen