

Lectionary 29 Year B Twenty-First Sunday after Pentecost 2021
October 17, 2021

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Parents and teachers who hear this story will be very familiar with the conversation Jesus has with James and John. In case you're not at that stage in your life, let me say as a parent, nothing good follows when the statement basically begins, "promise me you're going to say yes". And, just like always, nothing good comes of James and John's question. What they are asking is to become Jesus' #1 and #2 men. In the ensuing conversation, Jesus assures them that it will be a lot of responsibility and work, and that if they want to be in that place of honor they will have to do the things that Jesus does. Of course, that only makes the positions sound more appealing and prestigious. I'm sure that James and John couldn't wait to act like Jesus, and do things that no other disciple would or could.

But Jesus isn't so quick to agree. Even though James and John promise that they can do the things that Jesus will do, Jesus denies their request. Their desire is clearly for fame and fortune, and their ambition is noted by the other ten.

If this happened today, you could imagine the headline in the news. "Sons of Local Man Ask for Recognition for Community Work," if Zebedee were writing it. If the other disciples wrote the headline it might look more like, "Local Men Seek Honor Above Their Worth." That's the problem with headlines. Depending on who writes them and what they want you to think, the same event can produce very different results. It's easy to see why James and John want to be recognized as great or powerful. The great and powerful of our world get to write the headlines; they get to be in control.

You don't need to look far in our world to find headlines and news stories that seem to glorify the rich and powerful. Even if you only read the headlines every once in a while, you've still probably seen some truly appalling headlines: Stories about how the richest people in the world added to their wealth during a global pandemic. Stories about banks making millions of dollars in overdraft fees. Headlines that valorize police violence. All these stories are written by the powerful, the great, the leaders in our society.

Even though we might be quick to join the other ten disciples in judgement of James and John for their desire of greatness, it's important to wonder how much of their, and our, outrage stems from envy. Perhaps the disciples are jealous that they never thought to ask Jesus before the brothers did. It's a nearly universal human desire to be great, to be powerful, to be respected. All of the disciples want to be recognized as especially honored, just like many people today want to be rich and powerful.

In this way, Jesus' retort cuts to the heart of the matter. Jesus says, "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." In other words, among the Gentiles, or perhaps better translated as 'among the nations', the ones who are recognized as rulers, the ones who are recognized as great, are the oppressors. So, "Why would you want to be like them?" Jesus asks. The situation hasn't changed, even though it's 2,000 years later now. The rich, the powerful, and the great in our society still lord their power over us, and one way they do it is by making sure the headlines are always flattering to them.

This has made so-called "fixed" headlines a running joke in internet culture. In part, because it's funny, but also because these fixed headlines tell the truth about the brokenness and oppression of our world. My favorite comes from when Bill and Melinda Gates announced their

divorce. The original headline was “Bill and Melinda Gates Split. What Chance Does Your Marriage Have?” Clearly, if the rich and powerful can’t make marriage work, the rest of us don’t have any hope, right? But the fixed headline was perfect: “Local Couple Married Faithfully 75 Years Die Within 2 Weeks of Each Other. What Did They Have That Bill and Melinda Gates Couldn’t Afford?”

The fixed headlines all offer a simple twist in perspective. Like Jesus, they invite us to see our world not from the eyes of the rich, powerful, and great, but from the eyes of the least, the lost, and the forgotten. They reorient our thinking so that we read something more true-to-life. We read about the wealthy ransacking our economy during a pandemic, or about banks taking millions of dollars from people with no money, or of police officers employing deadly force at every opportunity. In the same way, Jesus tells the truth in a world that is happy to deceive us. Jesus tells us that the powerful are tyrants.

And so, Jesus also tells us that as Christians, this is not the way we are to live. If James and John or any of the disciples, or even if we wish to be great in the Kingdom of God, we will *not* be lord or ruler, but a servant. The first and greatest will be slave to all. This kingdom that Jesus comes proclaiming is turned upside down compared to the world we live in. It is this upside-down kingdom that we are called to, that we are baptized into. We are called into a life of service for the poor and needy, called into the way of compassion for those our world would leave behind. We are called to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, care for the sick, to protect the orphan, and care for the marginalized.

We do all of this, not because our access to heaven, forgiveness, or God’s infinite grace and mercy depend on it. Truly, heaven, forgiveness, and God’s grace and mercy are already ours through Christ. We live our call because this upside-down kingdom has *already* come to us and we are following Christ, our leader. The writer of Hebrews this morning gives us all the reasons that Jesus is greater than we are. And our world would have us believe that because of all the things that Jesus is that we aren’t, Jesus should only save himself.

Jesus clearly has the power to save himself, and he alone among all the world is the only person who deserves to be saved. He offers the proper prayers and supplications, and at least according to Hebrews, he is the perfect high priest in the order of Melchizedek. But for all of the things that Jesus is, for all his worthiness, he came not to be served and revered, but to serve. Jesus came not to save himself, but to make his life a ransom for many, to save the whole world, to save each and every one of us.

This is more than a mere example of Christian living. The ransom paid by Christ on the cross is our *salvation*. Christ, who came to us as servant of all, gives us eternal life through his own obedience, death, and resurrection. James and John seek honor and glory, but if Jesus “fixed” their headline, it might read, “Locals Seek Honor and Glory, Receive Salvation, Become Servants.” Thanks be to God. Amen.