

You Do Not Know What You Are Asking

In today's Gospel, we meet a mother who's determined to make sure that her sons get the recognition she thinks they deserve. James and John, otherwise known as the Sons of Zebedee or the Sons of Thunder, are among the disciples whom Jesus trusts the most. Only Peter, whom Jesus eventually designates as the rock upon which his church will be built, is closer to him than James and John. They, with Peter, are the disciples who accompany Jesus up the mountain, witness his transfiguration, and stand beside him as he heals the sick and feeds the crowds. They're already at our LORD's left and right hands. And yet, their mother takes it upon herself to seek still more renown for her sons, asking Jesus to honor them above all his other disciples when he comes into his Kingdom.

Some commentators believe this woman is Mary's sister, which would make her Jesus's aunt and her sons his cousins. But I'm skeptical for a couple of reasons. First, aunts typically don't kneel to their nephews, not even in a patriarchal society. Second, we know from other Gospel passages that Jesus and his family weren't necessarily on the best of terms. If, as Jesus observed, prophets are without honor in their home towns, they're probably honored even less by their families. Everybody knows them too well. If James and John really were related to Jesus, their mother might have preferred them to stay home, marry nice girls and go into their father's business, whatever it was, rather than traipsing around Israel behind their crazy cousin. But here she is, kneeling at Jesus's feet with apparent certainty that he will triumph and her sons deserve to triumph with him. It sounds to me like she's a fan, but not necessarily family.

Bible scholar Douglas R. A. Hare believes that something like this incident may actually have happened. In the Gospel of Mark, James and John themselves ask to sit in honor at Jesus's left and right hands. Hare believes that Matthew and Luke were embarrassed by their audacity.

Luke omits this story entirely, and Matthew lays their excessive ambition on their mother. Jesus knows better, though. He addresses James and John, not their mom, when responding to her request. The other disciples do the same, blaming James and John, not their mother, for trying to cut a sweetheart deal with Jesus behind their backs. It's all about honor for the disciples, and they don't appreciate being pushed out of the limelight by these two upstarts.

This passage is one of several in which Jesus tries to explain to ambitious souls that, in the Kingdom of God, the greatest honor goes to those who humble themselves and serve others. He says it in the second half of this passage, and he'll say something similar in tomorrow's passage from Luke. But there's an element of today's Gospel that may not be immediately obvious. It goes back to the transfiguration, and I think it's important.

On the mountain, James and John saw Jesus transfigured, his face and clothing suddenly dazzling white. They also learned that he was on conversational terms with two of the greatest prophets of Hebrew Scripture, Moses and Elijah. Moses was, of course, God's faithful servant who defied Pharaoh to bring the Hebrew people out of slavery in Egypt and lead them to the Promised Land. Elijah, the mighty prophet and miracle worker, stood alone against the pagan Queen Jezebel, risking his life and enduring considerable hardship to defend the worship of Adonai against the priests of Baal. If anyone deserves the honor of sitting at the right and left hands of Christ in the Kingdom of God, it's probably Moses and Elijah. That means James, John and their mother are lobbying for positions that are miles out of their league. As Jesus observes, Mom doesn't know what she's asking. James and John certainly do, however, and it might have been nice if they'd told their mother before she knelt at Jesus's feet. No matter how much she loved her sons, I very much doubt that any Hebrew woman of Jesus's time would have had the gall to claim they were greater than Moses or Elijah.

But as Jesus clearly tells his disciples, being great in the Kingdom of God isn't about where you sit at the table. It's about how well you serve others. The flip side of that is that you don't have to be great as the world understands greatness to be of service. You just have to be willing to roll up your sleeves and get to work.

After two thousand years of church teaching on this and other passages where Jesus talks about greatness, Western culture has been thoroughly indoctrinated with the idea that God values humble service over empty posturing. We've even concocted the phrase "servant leader" to describe the executive who's most deserving of the seven-figure salary and the corner office ... in theory. In practice, we still tend to hero-worship the show boaters and self-promoters. Arrogance too often passes for excellence. But you don't have to be an international celebrity or a Fortune 500 CEO to do a lot of good in this world. There's plenty of need everywhere, and anyone who's willing to donate a few hours or a few dollars to make the world a better place serves Jesus and earns a reward in the Kingdom of God, regardless of whether someone else is doing more simply because their circumstances are such that they can.

So today, as we worship in the knowledge that our world is badly damaged and very much in need of our love and care, it's important to remember that Jesus loves us and appreciates our service whether we're publicly honored for it or not. It's not about where you sit at the table. It's about what you do before you sit down. And if you do your part to make your corner of the world a little better, that's enough. You may never sit at Jesus's right or left hand, but I'm confident that, at some point in all of eternity, you'll have the chance to sit across the table from Jesus and be thanked for all the good you've done. You don't have to be Moses to be marvelous.

Amen.