

## PROPER 24, PENTECOST 21, YEAR B, OCTOBER 17, 2021

You gotta love James and John in today's Gospel. Elsewhere in scripture Jesus refers to them as the Sons of Thunder. It gives you the impression of loud, bombastic men who are rumbling and crashing about who can be hotheaded as when they suggested Jesus rain down fire on a Samaritan village that refused hospitality. They're twin brothers who left their father's fishing business to follow Jesus and, along with Peter, are the most frequently mentioned disciples.

Now, today's story starts out with James and John asking Jesus to grant them a request. But it's more than just a request. It's more of a demand as they ask Jesus to grant them whatever they ask for! Pretty presumptuous! What they ask is, "Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory." Glory is a churchy word but in today's vernacular it means prestige, fame, praise, distinction, success, honor, and renown. That's the glory that James and John wanted – power and prestige.

But then again, maybe they were not asking for power and privilege but asking to keep the power and privilege they already had. It's obvious from other stories that James and John already have some authority in the group. After all they had been chosen by Jesus to accompany him on some events that the other disciples were not given like being present at the Transfiguration and raising a girl from the dead. So, they already had a place of prestige in the group. Perhaps they were afraid of losing their privilege. Isn't it true that once a person has a place of privilege they don't want to give it up? In short, the Sons of Thunder want to finish first, win big, and retire as privileged favorites with unique, intimate access to Jesus's power and glory. In fact, they don't simply *want* these things; they're convinced that they deserve them and are *entitled* to them.

Surprisingly, Jesus answers them with patience. I think he does because James and John, like the rest of the disciples, still don't get it. This demand from them comes right on the heels of Jesus telling them about his suffering and death but it falls on deaf ears. They not only cling to the belief that Jesus will prevail the way they think he will in the end but can't conceive of a meaningful future apart from him.

Interestingly, Jesus does not criticize James and John for these ambitions. He doesn't say, "It's wrong of you to want greatness. Instead, he redirects their motivation. He offers them a radically different definition of greatness. Herein lies the heart of this week's Gospel lesson. In James and John's demand they are telling Jesus we're entitled to something here and we're willing to wait patiently but you need to give us our due in the end. In a nutshell, we've sacrificed a lot to be your disciples so what's in it for us?

What they're asking isn't so different from many Christians today. A lot of people see God and church as a place to go and get what they need and what they want. It becomes less about following Jesus and more about a God who gives us "whatever we ask." They see their faith as being transactional with God. We all know people who have left the church because God didn't do what they wanted. God didn't prosper them like they asked or healed a loved one. The American Prosperity Gospel promises a God who is at your beck and call, who will answer all your prayers, give you whatever you want. And they have been taught that God is supposed to do all of those things for us. It's what you call, if then theology. If I do all these wonderful things then God is going to reward me by giving me everything I ask for but If I don't then God is going to punish me. And

when they learn that God is God and not our genie, a lot of people no longer believe. They gave up before they ever really understood the true Gospel. It's not about what I can get from God but what I can do and be for others in God's name.

At this point, Jesus sat them down and explained to them, and to us, that the new world order, his kingdom was not like the old kingdom, the old-world order. In the old world order it is all about power and privilege and the people with power and privilege flaunt it over those who don't have it. Those in power make the rules for themselves and once there they hold onto their power and privilege with everything they have. If you don't, someone will take it away from you and they will do things their way and their way may not include you.

It seems that James and John thought the new world order, the kingdom of God, worked on the same principle as the old-world order. They thought that in God's kingdom it would still be about power and privilege. The difference for James and John would be that they would be the ones in power. They would be the ones with privilege, not the Romans. And many today still think that the Kingdom of God is just the current world power structure, but with them in charge.

Jesus said, "Not so!" In the kingdom of God, in the new world order, if you want to become great, you must be a servant. It's not those who sit in places of power, but those who serve who are the greatest in the Kingdom of God.

In the old world order everything trickles down from the top. Those on the bottom get what is left over. In the new world order, everything changes from the bottom. Change and transformation work their way up.

Lots of times we forget how God has come to us in the person of Jesus - who entered the world red-faced and crying. A God whose greatest displays of power include riding on a lowly donkey, washing dirty feet, hanging on a cross, and frying fish on a beach for his friends. How exactly have we gone from this God who empties himself of all privilege, and who perpetually pours Godself out and surrenders God's own life for his loved ones — to God as Iron Man?

Maybe such a God is easier — more familiar, more palatable, more impressive for us to swallow. And God as Iron Man isn't worried about our getting involved in the world's sorrows ourselves because that kind of God will take care of everything for us. If God can wave God's magic wand and fix everything why bother using our own creativity, why respond to the needs for justice, why engage in the slow, risky work of renewing creation, when "glory" is really about grabbing the fanciest seats in Jesus's throne room? Why contemplate a Jesus who glories in serving his guests and washing their feet — when we can contemplate a cozy combination of Iron Man and Santa Claus instead?

The *only real* path to success in Jesus's kingdom is through the surrendering of our most cherished forms of entitlement. By all means aspire to glory! But recognize that glory by Jesus's definition is not about privilege or upward mobility. It's not permission to guard, hoard, and multiply your own. Glory in God's kingdom is an exercise in subtraction. It's a movement downwards. It's the generous and perpetual expending of one's self in love.

It still doesn't seem to make much sense to us. But this is how we change the world. We change the world by the way we love and serve those around us. You know, we can sacrifice our souls for power and privilege and we will end up with nothing. Or we can be a servant to those around us, keep our souls, and maybe even see some other

souls join us in the journey. We change the world from the bottom up, not the top down. Love demonstrated through service is the ultimate trickle-up effect.

So how do we turn the world upside down? We turn it upside down when we turn James' and John's question upside down and when we learn to ask, "Teacher, we want to do for you whatever you ask of us". Amen.