

Left Handed Power

Well, we've finished our second presidential debate, and no matter who you're for or against, at least the two men didn't come to blows the other night.

Who knows what'll happen tomorrow night, since, after all, these two men are competing hard to become the most powerful man on earth, with the loser likely disappearing into obscurity.

Just so in today's gospel, we have two other men, James and John, the first of the twelve to be called by Jesus, who have themselves bellied up to the bar of power.

In those days, to be seated at the right hand of the king is to be next in line, second in command: think -- Joe Biden.

To be seated at the left, you will be third in the line of succession: think -- Senator Dan Inouye.

James and John are doing their best, behind the backs of the other ten, to get those coveted seats.

There's no question this whole story is an embarrassment to the early church.

When Matthew tells this story, he has the mother of James and John make the request of Jesus, and Luke forgets the request all together: he waters it down to a discussion among all the disciples about who's the greatest.

But today we hear from Mark, the earliest gospel and the most unvarnished, and he gives us James and John in all of their raw ambition.

They make their request immediately after Jesus tells them that the time is fast approaching when he will be arrested, tortured, spit on and crucified.

You would think that would make everyone sit down and shut up.

We didn't hear that in today's reading, but those are the lines immediately before the lesson we hear today: that's the scene; that's the context.

Maybe you heard the story of the man who is hit by lightning and is lucky enough to survive.

When he gets home and reports the event, his son, rather than hugging his father with relief, insists that they immediately rush out and buy a lottery ticket, since getting hit by lightning and winning the lottery have exactly the same odds.

It is that same kind of self-interest that leads James and John to demand their places of honor.

And yet, as Jesus tells them both, they don't know what they are asking for.

"Put us at your right and left when you take your throne," they ask; not realizing that the throne Jesus will soon mount is the cross, and to be at his right and his left is to hang with the two crooks crucified next to him.

The glory they want to share finds Jesus weeping and sweating blood in the Garden of Gethsemane – an agony Jesus endures all alone, because his friends, including James and John, are fast asleep, just a stone's throw away.

Yes, the request of these first two apostles practically drips with irony.

They know not what they ask.

So one more time, indeed, one **last** time, Jesus pulls them together and teaches them how different God's ways are from our ways – he once again reminds them about being the lamp that lights up the world, about being a seed ready to die so that its fruit can grow, about being the salt of the earth, the yeast of God's kingdom.

And today he drives it home that if they -- if we -- are to be these things, everything we think about power must change.

It was Genghis Khan who famously said:

“A man's greatest work is to break his enemies, to drive them before him, to take from them all the things that have been theirs, to hear the weeping of those who cherished them, to take their horses between his knees and to press in his arms the most desirable of their women.”

It's not just the warlords.

Plato, the father of western philosophy, says that being a slave to others is the very lowest form of existence, the very worst life conceivable.

It's not that way with Jesus; it's not that way with the Church.

Instead, Jesus calls his church to become a community that is something entirely different from the “eat or be eaten” mentality that still grips the world.

With wars burning hot in Syria and Afghanistan; with the war drums beating for an attack on Iran; with fewer and fewer people controlling ever greater amounts of the world's wealth, Jesus calls us close so that with him, we might think about power.

The power that we see on display each and every day is called by that wonderful Episcopal priest and writer, Bob Capon, right-handed power; it comes from that side of the brain dedicated to rational, logical thinking and to result-oriented attitudes.

Right-handed power comes in all shapes and sizes; from the carpet bombing of Dresden in Germany during World War II to the 9/11 attack to grounding that teenager who blew her curfew, and taking away her cell phone to boot.

Right-handed power's purpose is to get results; and, very often, it is extremely effective in getting results.

That's what James and John wanted from Jesus: a warrior Messiah full of right-handed power who would kick out the occupiers and put them in charge instead.

Let's get rid of those Romans with military force; let's remove Akmadinijad; let's place our trust in money and weapons.

As our bible study group knows, there are examples of God using right-handed power.

Perhaps God's best-known use of right-handed power is the story of Noah.

God looks down on the whole sorry mess the world has become and wipes it all out – all except for Noah, and his family, and the creatures they could gather.

Yet, after that flood and destruction, God not only promises never to do such a thing again, but God marks that promise by placing his bow in the clouds; and sees to it that the bow points not at us, but at God.

It seems that God decided that right-handed power isn't the way to go with us.

And so, we hear from Isaiah today about the suffering servant, the prophecy that comes fulfilled in Jesus; for it is Jesus who gives us what you might call left-handed power.

Left-handed power looks, for all the world, to be powerless.

It is power that is intuitive, creative, meandering, and patient.

Where right-handed power often looks like General Patton in shiny black boots, uniform crisp and pressed; left-handed power looks like old Uncle Ernie, frazzled and frumpy -- carrying a bottle of wine and maybe a tube of salami, under his arm.

Left-handed power is very often gentle.

It tries to see the other gal's point of view, to walk a mile in her shoes before passing judgment, to remove the log from my eye before reaching for the speck in hers.

Left-handed power listens quietly: like the man who reported to the monk that he listens to everything his wife has to say.

"Good job" says the monk, "Now, go home and listen to what she didn't say."

Left-handed power, especially in today's world, seems like a fool's game, because if you use it, you will certainly be called a fool, you

are likely to get beat up, and depending where you are, you may even be killed.

And yet, while right-handed power gets results; it's not so good at the one thing we were created for from the very beginning: the fostering and nurturing and building of relationships with one another.

It is left-handed power that waits rather than marching on with life.

It is left-handed power that forgives rather than trying to even the score or sulking away in silence.

It is left handed power that suffers rather than inflicting suffering.

Only that kind of power, it seems, keeps the door open to relationship: even when it comes to our enemies, even with those who are different, even with those who have hurt or offended us; for to be in relationship is the whole point of our creation; it is what makes the kingdom of God the kingdom of God.

It's the old story of the difference between heaven and hell.

In each place, everyone eats with 3 foot long chopsticks; in hell they starve because they can't reach their mouths with such long chopsticks; but in heaven they feast: because everyone feeds each other.

And this is what James and John miss today, and this is what Jesus so patiently, so gently, teaches them, teaches us, once again.

While right-handed power returns evil for evil, left-handed power turns out to be immune to evil: because it forgives, and takes in, and lets go of whatever evil may come its way.

“Father, forgive them, they don’t know what that are doing.”

What is evil going to do with that?

With forgiveness, with a refusal to retaliate, evil is consumed, and then it is destroyed, by what at first blush seems like an act of profound weakness; only to be revealed as the one and only solution to hate, to vengeance, to evil, in all of its forms.

A community based on left-handed power, a community that serves rather than being served; a community that forgives; a community that welcomes: this is the kingdom of God right here, right now, on earth.

And in such a community, Jesus stands among us; as present, as real, as he stood among the twelve on that dusty road so many years ago.

As Jesus approached Jerusalem all those years ago, he could have gathered an army and raised a rebellion.

He could have fled and hidden out and probably avoided all the horror that was coming his way.

We too are faced with these same choices when horror comes our way: fight or flight.

But Jesus chooses neither of these options.

Instead, he does what he summons us to do: he embraces whatever evil or pain or disappointment that comes: and in the embracing, loves it, forgives it, and lets it go.

We too can follow because we are ransomed by this Lord “who teaches us how to receive by giving, how to lead by serving, and how to find our lives by losing them -- for the sake of the people around us -- whom God loves so much.” D. Lose, Working Preacher, 10/21/12

+amen