

A Different Power

Well, the presidential debates are in full swing with practically half the country wanting to be our top dog, the Russians are fighting in Syria, and violence is once again boiling up in Israel.

Power seems to be flexing its muscles everywhere lately.

Just so in today's gospel, James and John, the first of the twelve to be called by Jesus, are bellying up to the bar of power.

In those days, to be seated at the King's right hand is to be first in line, think -- Joe Biden.

Seated at the left, you're second in the line of succession: think -- John Boehner, at least for the next week or so.

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

There's no question this whole story embarrasses the early church.

When Matthew tells it, why, it's **the mother** of James and John who's cornering Jesus, while Luke, well, he waters it down to a beef between **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 lean on Jesus right after he tells them that he'll soon be arrested, tortured, and crucified.

It's like the story of the man who's hit by lightning and survives!

He staggers home to tell his wife, who, rather than hugging him with relief, rushes him out the door to buy a lottery ticket, since your odds of winning the lottery are the same as getting hit by lightning!

It's that same tone deaf self-interest that leads James and John to demand their places of honor.

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

"Put us at your right and left when you take your throne," not yet understanding that his throne is the cross, and to be at his right and left is to hang crucified next to him.

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

Yes, the request of these first two apostles 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 - reminding them again about being lamps lighting up the world, seeds ready to die so fruit can grow, being the salt and yeast of God's kingdom.

But there is this: if they -- if we -- are to be these things, everything we think about power must change.

Genghis Khan once said:

"A man's greatest work is to break his enemies, to take from them all the things that have been theirs, to hear the weeping of those who cherished them, 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.

Instead, Jesus calls us to become a community entirely different from the "eat or be eaten" lunacy that still grips the world.

Jesus calls us close so that with him, we might think about power.

You might call the power that we see on display every day: right-handed power. Bob Capon+

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 atom bomb dropped on Hiroshima to the 9/11 attack to scaring the devil out of my son just the other day to teach him not to scare others!

Right-handed power's purpose is to get results; and, very often, it does just that.

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

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

Like 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 the flood, God not only promises never to do such a thing again, but God marks that promise by placing his bow, the rainbow, in the clouds; and God points that bow not at us, but at God, foretelling the day when God shall come to us, taking on the worst of our power so that we might learn the best of God's power.

That day arrives with Jesus, who gives us what you might call left-handed power.

Funny thing, left-handed power looks, for all the world, to be powerless.

It is intuitive, creative, meandering, and most of all, patient.

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

Left-handed power is 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 carefully, not only to what's said, but to what's left unsaid too.

Left-handed power, especially in today's world, seems like a fool's game, because if you use it, you will be called a fool, you may get beat up, and depending where you are, you may even be killed.

And yet, while right-handed power gets results; it's no good at accomplishing the very reason for our existence: to be in relationship with one another.

Left-handed power waits instead of charging in.

Left-handed power forgives rather than trying to even the score or sulking away in silence.

Only that kind of power, it seems, jams 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.

While right-handed power returns evil for evil, left-handed power is 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 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.

And in this community, Jesus stands in our midst; just as he stood among the twelve on that dusty road so long ago.

As Jesus approaches Jerusalem, he could gather an army and raise a rebellion.

He could run away and avoid all the coming horror.

But Jesus chooses another way.

He accepts all of our violence and insecurity, our fears and egos: and in the accepting, loves us, forgives us and frees us.

By becoming the one whom respectable society rejects, Jesus chooses to sit at the bottom, where left handed power lives.

So here’s the question: if sitting on the bottom is where God is, why would anyone want to be on top?

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