

## ***Matthew 20:17-28: Misguided Request***

### ***Preface:***

Jesus has pointed out the way two great powers in the ancient world, which shaped every single moment of the Twelve's lives, are fundamentally made powerless when the Kingdom of Heaven confronts them. He points out that wealth, which having a lot of can make a person first in his world, can leave them last if they don't reject it and accept the treasures in heaven their own generosity can bring. They end up relationship-poor with regard to God. He points out that honor, which having a lot of can make a person first in his world, can leave them last if they don't reject it and accept the honoring generosity of God. They end up shamed, instead.

But there are other ways of being first in the world, and today's passage catches them all. We'll talk about this after we pray.

### ***Prayer:***

Hosanna.

### ***Palm Sunday:***

It's Palm Sunday. The day where we remember what

the Church has called “Jesus’ Triumphal Entry, his entry into Jerusalem as it’s triumphant king, back from some great victory in battle. But his entry into Jerusalem is, ultimately, a real downer.

On the first Palm Sunday Jesus met no one’s expectations. Not the crowd’s, not his friends; he was a let-down, and a disappointment. He was supposed to enter triumphant. The crowd was, at least; they were the “triumphal ones” at the entry. They’re laying down their cloaks, stripping themselves and the trees, to make sure that the Messiah has a path into town that’s a little more classy than mud and sewage. Jesus enters to their praise, a half dozen Old Testament prophecies coming to life around him.

He continues on right up to the Temple, right up to the place where you’d expect the Messiah you’ve been waiting for to go, where Psalm 118, which everyone is quoting, “Hosanna! Hosanna!” shows him going. And Jesus looks all around, looks at everything: All the crowd hold’s their breath, because this is the moment they’ve been waiting for, you know? The pagan Romans who’ve been occupying God’s Own Land will be smited! Angels will probably flit around like gnats. It’ll be awesome. But Jesus looks around, and he

leaves, because, as Mark tells us in his summary of the story, “it’s late.” He goes back to the suburbs near Olive Tree Mountain, back the way he came, probably walking on the palm branches and now-muddy coats that the crowds had laid down for him. He takes the Twelve, who thought like everyone else that this whole thing would be a little more impressive, and they leave, and that’s it.

And it wasn’t just that this let-people down, right? But it made them angry, too: because when we’re let down, when our expectations go unmet, we end up angry. We may be sad for a few minutes, too, but only until our sense of justice kicks in, and we want ours.

Today, we remember the way the Son of David, God’s beloved son in whom He takes great pleasure, the long-awaited Messiah, just disappoints everybody, and sets himself up for their great betrayal.

We don’t see each other on Thursday, the day when Jesus washed his disciples feet. We might gather on Friday, the day when the anger of the crowd rose against Jesus, and he was crucified. We won’t see each other on Saturday, the day of great grief. We’ll come back together again on Sunday, Easter, the most

important day of the year, because without it, we're all, and the Church has always been, wasting our time.

Palm Sunday sets us up to remember New Commandment Thursday, Good Friday, Holy Saturday, Easter Sunday. But I don't want to just jump to Easter Sunday from here. There's no resurrection without crucifixion, no triumph over evil without open-eyed self-sacrifice. Love demands that we deny our own interests, our self-aggrandizement, our power.

The way of Jesus on Palm Sunday ended up setting the crowd against him like a predator sets itself against its prey. Jesus was meant to be the last scape-goat, the vaccine against vengeance, the death that killed death's power. But we people, even God's People, by choosing ways of power ourselves, we prop up death a little longer, giving it more room to work its disfiguring power over all of us. We poison our own water, when what Jesus offered us was a different, public, fountain.

### ***Too Close For Comfort:***

For all our time and our distance from the Twelve, all our studying, our learning, our praying, the very Spirit of God alive in us, we still, now and then, find ourselves right where they were.

***17 Now Jesus was going up to Jerusalem. On the way, he took the Twelve aside and said to them, 18 “We are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be delivered over to the chief priests and the teachers of the law. They will condemn him to death 19 and will hand him over to the Gentiles to be mocked and flogged and crucified. On the third day he will be raised to life!”***

The disciples don't respond at all to this. This is the third, and last time, Jesus predicts what's going to happen to him when they get to Jerusalem. It's no accident that we end this section of Matthew with a scene in which blind people can finally see; it's what we're meant to do, too.

But it is also not an accident that Jesus surrounds the predictions of his own death with stories that point out how to reject power. If we don't see by this next scene of healing, in which blind people who toss themselves on the mercy and power of God are given sight, then we ourselves are blind to what Jesus has been trying to tell us all.

To follow him is to not follow the world. And the world is built on self-interest, the collection of influence for our own self-aggrandizement.

We forget that we're a part of an alternative society, with alternative allegiances to God that simply don't allow for some choices. We forget that to be important in the Kingdom of Heaven is to strive for generosity, not wealth; it's to rejoice when those the world doesn't choose are chosen ahead of us; it's to find satisfaction in service to others, not when we ourselves are served. When we realize this, and how Jesus' death and resurrection opened us up to this, we move from blindness to, you know, better than lasik.

So Jesus describes for the third time what's going to come upon him when he, literally and figuratively, reaches the end of the line they're on. Then, then, revealing that the Twelve are still blind, this happens:

***A Favor:***

***20 Then the mother of Zebedee's sons came to Jesus with her sons and, kneeling down, asked a favor of him.***

***21 "What is it you want?" he asked.***

***She said, "Grant that one of these two sons of mine may sit at your right and the other at your left in your kingdom."***

I love it. I have a little favor. Now, a favor in the ancient world wasn't like a favor today. To receive a favor meant a kind of bondage; you'd be forever in the person's debt, obligated to do whatever they ask, when they ask it.

But, you know, it'd be kind of worth it, right? I mean, John and James, Zebedee's sons, would have the most prestigious seats at the table, after the King's, of course.

Almost certainly, Zebedee's wife--most likely a widow--here is getting what's going to happen on that first Palm Sunday, when Jesus arrives in Jerusalem, wrong. She's apparently been traveling along with them after they left Capernaum, and just like the others so far, is still blind to what Jesus will experience there. And actually, their mom is probably, although not certainly, Salome, one of the women who bore witness to Jesus' crucifixion, who went to the tomb to anoint his dead body, and who helped pay the bills of this traveling

band as they went around Judea. For all this closeness, this discipleship, she doesn't expect Jesus' kingdom to look anything other than like kingdoms she's known, and why would she?

***22 “You don't know what you are asking,” Jesus said to them. “Can you drink the cup I am going to drink?”***

***“We can,” they answered.***

***23 Jesus said to them, “You will indeed drink from my cup, but to sit at my right or left is not for me to grant. These places belong to those for whom they have been prepared by my Father.”***

Let me interrupt. Let's notice this. Jesus says they'll get the costs, which they so blithely, quickly, say that they can handle. These are guaranteed. In fact, they came looking for prestige and power, and what Jesus promises them is cost. Jesus promises them sorrow, trouble, and pain. This is the “cup” that Jesus has to drink from; it's one that will kill him. Jesus promises that these Sons of Zebedee will undergo trouble like his, but lets them know that doling out prestige and

power isn't his task, but his Father's.

We know about these "Sons of Zebedee," James and John. They were among the first to follow Jesus. James, along with Peter and John, was invited to see Jesus' transfiguration. They're nicknamed "Sons of Thunder," and had, you know, thunderous tempers. Acts tells us that King Herod kills James, the first of the Twelve to be murdered. He drank the cup that Jesus had to drink. John's end we know less of, although the Church has, for centuries, associated the Gospel of John, Revelation, and John's letters with this John. We've argued against for almost as long as we've argued for it, though.

But these two, they, along with Peter were Jesus' closest friends, more present at more things than the other disciples. And you could argue that by all accounts Jesus owed their mom a favor or two.

But Jesus can only guarantee them the trouble that he knows come when you decide to reject the world's constant abuse and misuse of power, which is simply that it comes back against you.

Now, the request doesn't go over well:

***“Indignant”:***

***24 When the ten heard about this, they were indignant with the two brothers. 25 Jesus called them together and said, “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. 26 Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, 27 and whoever wants to be first must be your slave— 28 just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”***

I love this. It's so tidy. “They were indignant with the two.”

This whole part of Matthew has been scenes in which Peter, and now James and John--Jesus' closest friends and disciples among the Twelve--just don't get what it means to be the Messiah, or to follow in the Messiah's footsteps.

They just don't get it. They expect that to be great is to be great, you know? To achieve, and arrive, and

accomplish. To get power. And Jesus tells them that his whole agenda is to give praise away. They aren't headed toward Jerusalem to become it's leaders; they're headed toward Jerusalem to disappoint, and if the Twelve--and Peter, James, and John--don't realize soon what's going to happen there, then they'll be disappointed to.

### ***Listen!***

***"...Whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave—just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."***

***"...Whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave—just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."***

Jesus paid our ransom. We're free. We are not our own, but, as Paul puts it, have been "bought at a price." Expensively redeemed. And our freedom has been granted us for one purpose; that we might indenture

ourselves to the rest of humanity, and become servants of others, and discover what it means, in our situation, to give our lives so that others might be freed.

***This Story:***

Jesus is the punch-line to today's story. He uses himself to diffuse the anger the Ten have for the Two, and his example is a shaming thing for the Two, who have mistaken their close relationship to Jesus for rights over his power, and not his pain.

We would rather have rights, access, to power than to pain. We would rather have freedom than slavery. We would rather have the world's understanding of first place and greatness than take on the Kingdom of Heaven's understanding.

We could ask what it takes to live as Jesus' lived. Maybe we'd talk about how deeply authentic and secure his relationship with God was, and I'd try to persuade us to lean into that, you know?

We could ask about the places that we have power, and how we can use our power in service to others, and I'd remind us that we all have power someplace:

in our homes, on our blocks, with our pets or the groups we're a part of, among each other or at work or in the community. Everyone is powerful somewhere, has some relationship in which we can "lord our power" over another or "exercise [if not] authority [then influence]." The cry of every human heart, of every child, is to be able to do something, to make something happen, and we quickly learn the joy that comes when someone else does what we want.

I don't know what to ask. I have no idea how to live with this stuff. I fumble my way forward, you know?

***Tilted:***

I like getting what I want. I don't like doing what other people want me to do. I'm tilted in a critical way, you know? If the crowd's over there, I'll be over here, just to do the opposite, because I am stained a subtle shade of sin. It makes it easy to be critical of power, because I'm surrounded by its exercise everywhere. Our world, my career as a pastor, everywhere around us, there's this drive to be the best, and if you're less than the best, less than the greatest, by whatever community standards exist, you're failing. How many followers do you have? How strong are you? How much capital? How many square feet? How many

people served? We learn from our first days, this drive to win: To hold our breath the longest, to climb the highest tree, to be the best friend, to get the most A's, to stand out, because we're so desperately driven to stand out to someone.

Jesus didn't care. Jesus simply didn't care what the world thought about him, and so he could give himself away, in the right way, to whoever needed him. He could come and go in service to others, and not seek to be served by them, because he didn't have anything to prove to himself. God loved him, and it was enough.

I can't outline, in all our circumstances, what it might take for us to give ourselves away for others. What would it take for you to serve people more, achieve greatness as Jesus models it? Honestly, for most of us, all it would take is more sleep and a few more meaningful conversations.

***Reminder:***

I can remind us that there are great people around us. We just don't realize it. In our congregation, many, many of us do many many things out of a sense of service to the rest of us. It's never seen or praised. We

give our cash, a commodification of our time and our skill, so that the lights stay on, so that we have staff around to help do whatever. We pray. Almost no one sees any of it, and those of us who do these things, we let it slip through our memories, we've trained our motivations to be faithful ones, oriented toward others. And it is training, and it is greatness, but one that is not seen, by and large, until Christ returns.

In our neighborhoods, in our schools, even in our governments, there are people who are doing what they can for others, without being motivated by the glory or praise or cash it will bring them. They are Christians, or will be, if God has his way with them. Each of our lives are filled with silent servants, people who have chosen to care for others even though it doesn't do them any good. This is greatness, but by and large it's not acknowledged until Jesus returns.

Salome, James' and John's mom, she doesn't stop following Jesus around paying his bills. James drinks the cup Jesus drinks; John lives his life in vocation to Christ from this point on. The Twelve keep going. They nearly all get it, get what Jesus has been trying to tell them. They become like him in his service to those around him. It's one that results in their greatness, but

not yet, not unless you count our praise at their examples of faithfulness, which, while nice, won't pay for lunch. But wait until Jesus returns, man...

My great temptation, in a time of bad news, is to trade service for indignation. I can feel put out at the world, want to shake my finger, you know, moan and complain about how bad things are, and do very little to change what I see. It's to give in to the fatalism that we all ought to just get what we can get anyway, because the whole thing seems like it's going to pot, and feel indignation at those who have more than we do. But the truth is that the world has always been going to pot for someone, for whoever is being hurt, being killed, dying or desperate. For all the power and wonder and joy and laughter, which are so real and so present, for all the hope and faith and love, this thing is broken until Jesus returns, and joy is unsustainable.

### ***Until Then...***

Until then, what the world has is us. We are Jesus here, filled with the Spirit, until he comes back to reveal everything, and pass out resurrection. We have the power to channel every desire for greatness, every desire to prove ourselves, in this direction: To see the world as blessed as it might be blessed, to build it up

in every way through our service to those around us. Everything we give for Smoky Row, for our communities, for the poor and oppressed, the immigrant and stranger, the needy and our families, it disrupts the way the world works, and kills death's reach a little bit more. It is our calling, and it will result in our greatness at Jesus' return. Until then, all I can do is let you know how grateful I am to have a share in the unseen work you all are doing in serving so many.

***"...Whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave—just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."***

What does it mean for us to be giving our lives away? We can't be everything, but we are who we are, living where we are: What does it mean to serve like Christ served in these places? If our hunger is for greatness and praise and power and wealth, then we still need the Spirit to transform some part of our hearts, and we need to understand what motivated Jesus more completely than we do right now.

If being a Christian means anything, it means taking

what Jesus says today seriously, and living like he lived, for each other, and for those around us.

Those disappointed Palm Sunday crowds were the same ones who on Good Friday withheld Jesus' freedom from him. Our call is to avoid withholding from God and others our service, our power, our help. If we can embrace that, we'll embrace greatness. As we go, and we discover greatness here and there among us, those people quietly giving and giving and giving, thank them, honor them, and rejoice in the honor they'll receive when Jesus returns.