

Sermon 10 20 & 21 18

I want to build on last week's sermon. To refresh for those of you who weren't here – the basic point I made is God is God and we're not. We would like to know everything and we would like to think that God owes us explanations, but God doesn't. However, that doesn't mean God doesn't love us. God does love us. We just don't always understand what God is up to in the world and that is because God is God and we're not. *God is in control* and we're not. That can be very hard to accept.

Now, moving on – does this mean we have no effect on what happens to us? Do we just say, “OK God, you take care of everything?” No. We are here to do God's work in the world. We have *agency*. We have the capacity to act, to make choices, to ignore God or to do what God tells us to do; which means we Christians are here to love each other and our neighbors as much as God loves us. *We are responsible for each other*. I once had a chat with some folks about this. They were asking about “love your neighbor as yourself.” They asked me, “What does that mean?” So I asked them, “Who is your neighbor?” We talked... And we eventually came up with: everyone is our neighbor. For which I was grateful. Good answer!

So, do we just decide God is in charge and lie down and let whatever is going to happen ...happen? No! We have agency and we have responsibilities – to love God and to love our neighbors as much as we love ourselves – to do what is right – and thereby serve God.

Just because God is in charge doesn't mean we get to sit back and relax.

It's easy to get mixed up about what God wants us to do. James and John, the brothers and disciples in our gospel reading for today were very mixed up. I'm not even sure they were thinking about God at all when they thought being a disciple was about jockeying for position in the organization. The disciples, as portrayed in Mark can come off as pretty juvenile.

Whenever I read about James and John asking Jesus if they can sit at his right and left hands, I always recall a particular episode from my adolescence. It was a learning moment. When I was in seventh grade, fresh out of the innocence of grade school, I remember walking down the hall of our school with a friend of mine. We were part of a group of friends and we thought we were pretty cool, I guess. The girl I was walking with was the leader. And another one of our group came running up full tilt behind us and jumped and just put her

arms in between us and split us apart! And she started talking real loud like I wasn't even there! Wow! It was shocking! It made me wonder what I needed to do to be "cool," let alone be a friend! And thus adolescence began...

I have to say, our gospel reading reminds me of this social dynamic.

James and John. John, the disciple who Jesus loved, who apparently was closer to Jesus than anybody else. And James, who we really don't know that much about except that he was one of the first disciples drafted. They were brothers and they don't seem to be, at least not in the rest of the New Testament, the sort who care about rank or position. But that's not the picture we get of them here, in our Gospel for today. They began their conversation with Jesus with, "Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you." What? If someone came up to me, and began a conversation with that, even if they were my husband, or a close friend, or one of my kids, I would immediately know *something* was up!

But Jesus had (and still has, as far as I can tell) infinite patience. So he simply asked, "What is it you want me to do for you?" And the two brothers started jockeying for position in the organization. "Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory." What a couple of troublemakers! Talk about stirring the pot! It's very recognizable behavior though, isn't it? We've all seen people behave like this, haven't we? In the neighborhood. In the workplace. Why would it be any different in the year 30? It's about power and how do I get it.

Little did they know the price of the power they wanted. They didn't even know what real power is. When Jesus spoke of power and authority, he was speaking of a power born of love, of a love so great that all of our usual associations with power, our expectations, are upended. Jesus wasn't interested in the kind of power that commands armies.

This was his interest: "Whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to become first among you must be slave of all."

A new kind of power. Did they get it? No!

The other ten disciples were angry with James and John. For their presumption? More likely for thinking of a power grab before they did. All of them were imagining a triumphant revolution with a return to the glory days of Solomon, with Jesus as king. Jesus asked them if they were ready for a baptism by fire – true trials of the spirit. They all blithely

answered “Sure!” Little did they know... They would all endure persecution. They would all die as martyrs, all except John.

A funny thing happened on the way to becoming the Church. After the Resurrection, after Jesus ascended into Heaven, the Comforter, the Holy Spirit arrived and the disciples’ minds were opened and they were forever changed. All those times when Jesus was still among them, still desperately trying to teach them? They finally got it. The Holy Spirit is often portrayed as flames of fire over their heads. Try to think of the Holy Spirit as light bulbs, suddenly coming on, lots of light bulbs, suddenly glowing over their heads! They finally got it! They finally began to see the big picture. The last will be first, the first will be last, greatness is about serving and sharing. Power is about the grace to give it away. Love is meant to be shared, with everyone. We are not here to be served, but to serve others.

The disciples finally got it – and they went out into the world as we say every Sunday, “rejoicing in the power of the Spirit.” From then on, it didn’t matter what happened to them. They knew the direction they were going in.

It didn’t matter what position they held in the organization. Jesus’ Church was and is, much bigger than that. It’s all about working together, trusting each other, collaborating. And ultimately, it’s about “...with God’s help.”

That’s where faith comes in real handy. We’ve got to believe God *can* and *will* help us. Because even though God is God and we’re not... God *is* God and *we* belong to God.