

FIRST LESSON: Isaiah 53:4-12
SECOND LESSON: Mark 10:35-45
October 17, 2021

“Ambition”

Sermon © Lisa C. Farrell

A man in London was boasting that he was born an Englishman and he would die an Englishman.

A passing Scot overheard him, turned and said, “Dear God, man, have ye nay ambition?”

Ambition. It can be a negative or a positive attribute. Ambition can drive us to improve ourselves and our communities. It can also be the motivating force behind stepping on others in order to get to the top. Ambition can sometimes blind us to reality, and this certainly proved to be the case with James and John.

James and John had been with Jesus for three years. The two of them along with Peter formed Jesus’ inner circle. They were party to his most intimate thoughts. They were with Jesus on the mountain when he was transfigured and Moses and Elijah appeared. But James and John were brothers, and here blood appears to be thicker than water. There are only two seats of honor on either side of a king. Peter was left out of the equation. We’re not told what Peter thought of this, but we can guess.

Jesus had just finished explaining FOR THE THIRD TIME what was about to happen when they got to Jerusalem. He will be handed over to the chief priests and scribes. They will condemn him to death. They will hand him over to the Gentiles. They will mock him, spit on him, flog him and kill him, and after three days he will rise again. There is no ambiguity here, yet James and John appear to have taken none of this in. Instead, they come to Jesus and say, “Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask.” That’s pretty audacious to start with.

Jesus asked, “What do you want me to do for you?”

And they replied, “Let one of us sit at your right and the other at your left in your glory.”

In the banqueting customs of the time seating was arranged according to status. The farther away from the host the guest was seated, the lower their status. Those seated on either side were accorded the highest honor. In the case of a king these would be the king’s most senior and trusted advisors. This was a power play. James and John wanted to be in charge and elevated above the other apostles. They had visions of glory and power.

Now *how could they be this clueless?* we ask. Apparently, the human race is really good at being clueless. We excel in hearing what we want to hear and

disregarding what we don't. This is true especially when it comes to money and status. Jesus tells us, "Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." But Pastor Creflo Dollar says "Some people say it's about peace, joy and love. **NO!! It's about MONEY!**" and Joel Osteen says, "God wants us to prosper financially, to have plenty of money, to fulfill the destiny He has laid out for us."

James and John were interested in honor and power. Riches are normally part of the deal. And Christians today are every bit as capable of being seduced by money, public adoration and power as anyone else. We have to be on our guard. It is very human to want to be looked up to and deferred to. James and John had spent their entire lives dreaming of the future Messianic kingdom, and they had followed the Messiah for three years. *Sure, he had said some strange things lately about suffering and dying, but maybe he was just speaking metaphorically.*

Jesus' reply ought to have given them a hint that they were in over their heads. "You don't know what you are asking," he said. "Can you drink the cup I drink or be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with?" To which they replied, *yes, we can!*

Surprisingly Jesus told them that they would drink the cup he drank and be baptized with the same baptism. He was foretelling the persecutions to come. But, he said, to sit at his right or left was not an honor for him to grant. If we think of this in the context of the cross the imagery even becomes ominous, because those on his right and on his left were crucified thieves.

When the other ten apostles heard what James and John had requested, they were furious. Our English translation says "indignant." That's a great word. We get indignant a lot. But the Greek word can also mean incensed. Basically, there was going to be hell to pay. So, Jesus headed things off at the pass and called them all together. He said, "You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."

All of the disciples would have known what Jesus was talking about first hand. If those at the top were working together there was no rule of law or form of justice to stop them. And these leaders expected and demanded the complete subjugation and humiliation of the people under them. But this is not the kind of authority God wants us to exercise. Kingdom authority is the very opposite of worldly authority, and because it is so different no one has been able to successfully create a government that operates according to kingdom principles. Many have tried. All have failed. Human nature gets in the way every time. This side of heaven it is not humanly possible to achieve that level of perfection. But as Christians we are to live in such a way that people can see in us the way God wants humanity to live. We are to reveal the nature of God

in the way we treat one another. Whoever wants to be great should be a servant. This word is *diakonos*, from which we get deacon. It means a servant, a servant who could or could not be a slave. But then Jesus continues. Whoever wants to be first must be the slave of all. That word, *doulos*, means slave. And a slave has no honor, no position, no autonomy at all. In terms of status think of the difference between the maître de and the very expendable guy hired to scrub the pots. The highest in the kingdom of heaven is the one willing to take the lowliest forms of service on earth.

The last sentence in our New Testament reading today is perhaps the most significant. Jesus said, “For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” Even God’s son did not come into the world so that others could wait on him, he came to serve. And he came to give his life as a ransom for many.

The New Testament gives us several different images to explain how Jesus’ death and resurrection frees us from sin and brings forgiveness and new life. The one we are most familiar with, and might be under the impression is the ONLY one is sacrificial atonement. This is in fact the merger of two images, Old Testament sacrifice and the judicial system. We are guilty. The lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world dies in our place. Sin has been atoned for. Justice has been satisfied. This is the model favored by the Roman Catholic and Protestant traditions. Another metaphor less known to us in Western Christendom is literally “re-heading.” Jesus becomes our new head and we share in his perfect nature. Our sinful nature is gradually transformed and corrected. This is called “divinization” and is the predominate theology of the Eastern Orthodox denominations. But the third is ransom theology. Jesus pays our ransom. His death does something. It secures our release. We are being held captive by the power of sin and evil, and Jesus’ death frees us.

Who is this ransom paid to? The Devil? God? We are not told. But what Jesus does by going to the cross is more than just an inspiring example of self-sacrifice and humility. The cross brings release from captivity and deliverance from evil. It actually does something to free us. This is one of the reasons why our version of the Lord’s prayer says forgive us our debts. Sin has put us in debt. We owe restitution to God and others, but we have no means to pay our way out of it. In the ancient world those in debt could be imprisoned or sold into slavery to pay off their debt. If it was really bad the entire family could end up sold into slavery. The only way to escape this fate was for someone else to pay what was owed, to ransom the debtor. And the patron who did such a thing for another would be owed eternal gratitude and loyalty, but another image overlaps this one because Jesus gave **his life** as a ransom. The only acceptable payment, was death.

It is important for us to realize that the images the bible gives us for how salvation works are just that—images. They are metaphors. People don’t realize this and they take them literally. What scripture is attempting to do is use the limited cultural context of the time to put into words things that are actually indescribable. And each image has its limitations, as all metaphors do.

Jesus’ message in this context is about servant leadership. James and John got it wrong. They were thinking of glory in human terms. But God does

not value the things that we value. And all possessions and human status in this world will pass away. What we will be left with is who we are, and what we have done for others.

Some time ago I found a short piece called “What’s Important Is . . .”

- What's important is...
not what kind of car you drive,
but rather how many people you give a lift.
- What's important is...
not the size of your house,
but rather the number of people you welcome into your home.
- What's important is... not what you possess, but rather what you give.
- What's important is...
not how many friends you have,
but rather how many to whom you are a friend.
- What's important is...
not if you live in a great neighborhood, but rather how you treat your neighbor.

Amen.

Isaiah 53:4-12

- ⁴ Surely he took up our pain
and bore our suffering,
yet we considered him punished by God,
stricken by him, and afflicted.
- ⁵ But he was pierced for our transgressions,
he was crushed for our iniquities;
the punishment that brought us peace was on him,
and by his wounds we are healed.
- ⁶ We all, like sheep, have gone astray,
each of us has turned to our own way;
and the Lord has laid on him
the iniquity of us all.
- ⁷ He was oppressed and afflicted,
yet he did not open his mouth;
he was led like a lamb to the slaughter,
and as a sheep before its shearers is silent,
so he did not open his mouth.
- ⁸ By oppression and judgment he was taken away.
Yet who of his generation protested?
For he was cut off from the land of the living;
for the transgression of my people he was punished.
- ⁹ He was assigned a grave with the wicked,
and with the rich in his death,

though he had done no violence,
nor was any deceit in his mouth.

10 Yet it was the Lord's will to crush him and cause him to suffer,
and though the Lord makes his life an offering for sin,
he will see his offspring and prolong his days,
and the will of the Lord will prosper in his hand.

11 After he has suffered,
he will see the light of life and be satisfied;
by his knowledge my righteous servant will justify many,
and he will bear their iniquities.

12 Therefore I will give him a portion among the great,
and he will divide the spoils with the strong,
because he poured out his life unto death,
and was numbered with the transgressors.
For he bore the sin of many,
and made intercession for the transgressors.

Mark 10:35-45

35 Then James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came to him. "Teacher," they said, "we want you to do for us whatever we ask."

36 "What do you want me to do for you?" he asked.

37 They replied, "Let one of us sit at your right and the other at your left in your glory."

38 "You don't know what you are asking," Jesus said. "Can you drink the cup I drink or be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with?"

39 "We can," they answered.

Jesus said to them, "You will drink the cup I drink and be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with,**40** 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."

41 When the ten heard about this, they became indignant with James and John. **42** Jesus called them together and said, "You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them.**43** Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, **44** and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all. **45** For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."