

WANTING TO BE CLOSE TO BE CLOSE TO JESUS: AMBITION OR PIETY

Job 38:1-7; Psalm 104:1-9, 24, 35C; Hebrews 5:1-10; Mark 10:35-45

A sermon preached by the Reverend Theodore S. Atkinson
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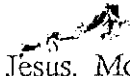
IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

Kay brought home a stack of Newsweek Magazines given to her by a friend and we spent the evening perusing them. My idea of a cheap date. The same stories came up issue after issue: the presidential election, Serbia, health care, the Middle East, the economy, and the entertainment industry including athletics. One word common to all the articles was "power." It was used over and over. It made me wonder. What is power? Who has power? How should we exercise power? In the world of news magazines, power is the ability to influence or control other people's lives. Power means we're able to win the football game, influence the stockmarket, control events in the Middle East, manipulate public opinion. It may be political power like Arafat or Barak, or it may be financial power like Bill Gates, or star power like Britny Spears. Power means we're able to do things and get things done.

One sure sign that people have power is that other people want to get near them – to photograph them like the paparazzi, or to attack them, like terrorists in the Gulf of Aden attacked representatives of the most powerful military force in history, or to cheer them, like the citizens of Serbia applauding their newly elected leader. Powerful people attract others like a candle attracts moths. Everybody wants to be somebody. And one way to become a somebody is to get close to a powerful person. Mark David Chapman was a nobody until he got close enough to shoot John Lennon.

So we shouldn't be surprised with James and John. They say to Jesus, "Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory." Notice what they're asking for, First, they want preeminence, to bask in his glory. Second, they want to be near Jesus, closer to Jesus than anyone else. Third, they want power for themselves. That's what big corporations are hoping to get when they pay big money in support of presidential candidates. They want preeminence. They want to be close to the seat of power because that gives them influence.

Now the request of James and John isn't all bad. They were big time supporters of Jesus. They'd been out in the villages campaigning for him, telling people of his coming kingdom, trying to get people to vote for



Jesus. Most of us have a hope that if the right people get into power we'll be better off; the world will be a better place, a safer place. That's why we campaign for people. That's why we vote for them. And when they come into their glory we wouldn't mind if they invited us to their inaugural ball. James and John are looking forward to election day - not election day for the United States but God's election day, when their very own teacher, Jesus, would come to power and receive the glory he deserved. So what James and John are asking isn't all bad. It's a sign of their deep faith in Jesus. They believe that he's coming into glory and they want to be right there with him.

James and John preface their request to be near Jesus by saying, first, "Give us whatever we want." Isn't that what we're asking of the presidential candidates. Give us whatever we ask whether it's lower taxes or our national debt paid off. Give us what we ask: cheap prescription drugs, better education, less government or a strong government that will fight for the middle class. Give us what we want. We can understand James and John. We can understand their desire. *We've heard our children ...* We've heard ourselves say the same thing. We do it all the time when we pray. "Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you." What James and John want, however, are top-ranking cabinet appointments. They want to sit as close to Jesus as they can, and while this may be an example of blind ambition, it may also be an expression of profound faith and piety. James and John have done everything to get Jesus elected King of the world. They've campaigned tirelessly. They absolutely believe that Jesus will reign. In spite of his dire predictions, in spite of gathering storm clouds, they're sure Jesus' is going to win and they want to have the inside advantage.

When Jesus replies to their request, he doesn't rebuke James and John because it's not a bad thing to be close to Jesus. It's a good thing. And it's not a bad thing to pray for what we want - as long as what we want is what God wants for us. The only problem is James and John don't have the slightest idea of how Jesus understands power and glory. They have no idea that Jesus has been trying to tell them that his glory and power will be displayed preeminently on the cross and those on his right and left hand will be, not James and John, but two condemned criminals. So, Jesus says to James and John, "You don't know what your asking, and if you did know, you wouldn't ask."

Then Jesus asks James and John, "Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?" Although they don't know what they're saying, they don't hesitate. "Yes, we are able." They seem to believe that the new world order Jesus will inaugurate will be just like the old world order only with new leadership. The bad guys will be removed, and God's new administration will be inaugurated with Jesus in the number one position and the most loyal members of his campaign staff on either side of him. Once this change has been accomplished, then they'll get to implement their vision of a new world. That's what they believe. They don't realize that new leaders are very often no better than old leaders – Batista is replaced by Castro, the Shah of Iran is replaced by the Ayatollah, Putin replaces Yeltsin – but it's the same old world.

"That's not the way it will be in my kingdom," Jesus tells them. Christ's kingdom won't be like the kingdom's of this world and its great ones. Jesus says, "The number one people in my kingdom are not the powerful having their pictures taken with the president at the head table. ^{at the inaugural ball.} The number one people in my kingdom are the ones setting up the tables and chairs, placing the plates and silverware on the table. They're the ones walking through the reception hall with trays of wine and bread to serve the guests. They're the ones staying late after the bigwigs have left – sweeping up the floor and mopping up the spills."

James and John want Jesus to hurry up and get elected so they can become somebody. They don't know what they're asking. ^{They still don't} They have yet to understand the kind of power that Jesus has, or the way Jesus exercises power. Jesus says, "The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many." Jesus isn't pretending to be a servant until the time comes for him to take off his work clothes, put on his royal gown and sit down on his throne. He's a servant through and through. He's not in it for reward. He's in it for the love of God, which promises him nothing but the opportunity to give himself away. The best seat he'll get this side of the grave is the cross.

James and John didn't understand. I'm not sure I understand either. Certainly, the church, for the last 2000 years hasn't given much evidence that it understands. If we don't understand it, we shouldn't be too hard

on:ourselves. And if we do understand what power is and who has it and how it's to be used, it's only because Jesus is still serving us, still feeding us, still giving himself away for us.

This much is for sure: whether we can make sense of it or not, serving is how we transform the world. Our leaders should be servants, and the best ones *will* be. The power God has given us is the strongest stuff in the world: the power to serve, which is the power to turn the question of James and John upside down, "Teacher, we want to do for you whatever you ask of us."