

Let us pray together: Open our eyes to see your Spirit in our life. Open our hearts to receive the blessings you send each day. Guide us with your wisdom so that through us Christ may walk on the earth once again. Amen.

The disciples, brothers James and John, wanted to sit on the right and left of Jesus, positions of honor, power and greatness. Who were these two? These two brash brothers were among the first disciples called by Jesus who called them the sons of thunder. That sounds more like the name of a motorcycle gang than two disciples. We're not quite sure why Jesus gave them that name, it may be because in Luke's biography of Jesus, once when Jesus was not being welcomed by a village, the brothers said to Jesus, 'Lord, do you want us to call fire down from heaven to destroy them?'" (Luke 9:54).

Most Christ-followers would probably consider that James and John were out of line and presumptuous when they said, "**Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory.**" This was a blatant request to grab power and glory before the other disciples asked. When you read or heard their request you probably thought to yourself – 'how could they have been so arrogant?' The other ten disciples agreed with you. The scripture says, **When the ten heard this, they began to be angry with James and John.**

Yet Jesus didn't react with anger at James and John's request but treated them kindly asking if they really understood what they are asking for. If you're a parent or a grandparent or a caring neighbor, you can probably understand Jesus' reply because you have had a young child ask you for something that was well beyond the child's understanding. You most likely refused the request, but really could not explain why because the child was not mature enough to understand the reason for the refusal.

James and John couldn't fully understand what Jesus was saying. They seemed to have missed Jesus' teaching about his impending death and resurrection. Today's scripture from Mark comes after the verses in which Jesus plainly tells all the disciples for the third time that he was going to Jerusalem and he would be killed and raised from the dead on the third day.

These words didn't register with the disciples. They wanted to believe Jesus was the Messiah, the one who would restore Israel to its former greatness. They could not understand that Jesus was a different type of Messiah – a suffering servant Messiah. The disciples couldn't comprehend Jesus' purpose for being on earth.

James and John were focused on the throne-room scene, the pomp and circumstance, when they requested to sit at Jesus' right and left. There would be two people on Jesus' right and left – at his crucifixion. Two people were crucified with Jesus –two bandits – one of Jesus' right and one on his left. There would be a sign posted on that cross that said Jesus was 'King of the Jews.' Probably not the kind of king and kingdom James and John had in mind.

The disciples – all of them - wanted to be great. The desire for greatness and power has been in humanity's DNA since Adam and Eve. Think about historical figures who had 'great' in their title. Herod the Great, Alexander the Great, Catherine the Great and, don't forget Gonzo the Great – from the Muppets!

Has this desire for greatness and power decreased as history has progressed? I don't believe so. People today want to be great, to be better than others. We hear it practically every day, especially in the political realm. There's not a lot of humbleness in many of today's politicians.

Let me share with you one of my favorite stories about people who think they are greater than anyone else because I saw this behavior so often when I travelled as a businessman.

Airport waiting areas seem to bring out the worst in people. On one particular day, bad weather had caused delays and cancellations throughout the system. Hundreds of anxious travelers were on standby. One of these passengers, a senior business executive, was desperate to get on a plane so he wouldn't be late for a meeting. He kept crowding the counter, trying to get the airline staff to do something to move his name higher up the standby list.

The agent had just put down the microphone, having said to the crowd for the third or fourth time: "Those of you who are on standby, please sit down and we will call your name when we have a seat for you."

But this was man kept pestering the agent, explaining how important it was that he get on the next flight. Finally, in exasperation, he asked, "Do you know who I am?"

The agent had had enough. Picking up the microphone, the agent announced: "Ladies and gentlemen, we have a man here who does not know who he is. Would someone please claim him, offer him a seat in the waiting area, and tell him I'll talk to him when it's his turn?"

Today's world is full of people who think they are important and the greatest!

Evidently, this senior business executive hadn't heard what Jesus told the disciples: **but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all.**

Today, most people's reaction to Jesus' comment would probably be, "Who, in their right mind, wants to be a servant?"

Jesus' life and ministry described a community that was utterly different from the business as usual that Jesus encountered all around him in his day – and we encounter in our day. Jesus was killed because he advocated God's principles for living. He lived as God wants us all to live. Those in power in the world in Jesus' day would do all they could to protect themselves and their way of living from what Jesus preached – including killing Jesus. They definitely wanted to keep business as usual.

Jesus' life illustrates that he was servant of all. Jesus walked the talk as we say today. Jesus says he came to give his life as ransom for many. This phrase – to give his life as a ransom for many - has numerous interpretations, but it is key to understanding Jesus and how he thought about his ministry.

Ransom can mean a payment, or it can mean secure a release. However, in the Old Testament, ransom meant a liberation brought about by divine strength. Jesus, the divine, came to serve and was obedient to the point of death on the cross. Jesus' death liberates all people, frees all people, to live a life free from the ways of the world and restores them to membership in God's community.

The takeaway for today? Jesus wants us to acknowledge the lure of power that ensnares us all, not just James and John. Jesus wants us to be aware of all of the kinds of oppression that we live with and often accept – and often inflict on our neighbor. Jesus wants us to reject the illusion of power and accept the true meaning of greatness: service to others.

"Everybody can be great," said Martin Luther King Jr., "because anybody can serve. You don't have to have a college degree to serve. You don't have to make your subject and verb agree to serve. You only need a heart full of grace. A soul generated by love."

May each of you be a soul generated by love of neighbor and self. Try being more of a servant this week than you normally are and let me know how it goes. What's it like not to strive to be great, but to serve?

May God bless your every effort.