

“Humble Service Before Power”
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana
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Mark 10: 35-45

Is anyone else amazed at how it is still over a year from the general election, and it feels as if we should be going to the polls to elect a president next month? We never used to get debates among presidential primary candidates this early. It's almost as if the campaigns took a page out of the merchandisers' handbook, as we get earlier and earlier advertising for Christmas sales every year.

It's always been disheartening to me to witness all the negativity that now accompanies campaigns in our country, whether it's on a local, state, or national level. Behind all that we witness in modern-day campaigning, though, is the premise that the power rests with the masses. It is by our authority that women and men are granted power or authority in government. For without a presidential election every four years, we would have a monarch or could even have a tyrant as our nation's leader. Instead, from the president down to the local school board, each person who seeks elected office must assume that post after convincing a majority of his or her constituents that he or she is the right person for the job.

I cannot imagine why someone in his or her right mind would want to run for president! So it makes me ask: What motivates people to run for public office? I think one of the answers is power. Power to control. Power to influence others. Power to manipulate and change and reap material rewards. Power is one of our basic human desires that I doubt will ever disappear. As long as there are hierarchies in our culture, there will always be someone who wishes to sit at the top.

Barbara Brown Taylor shares these thoughts on power and its relation to the text we have read from Mark today:

Power thrives in the rare air at the top of any given hierarchy, where those who have it generally require tinted windows and bodyguards. One sure sign that people have power is that other people want to get near them – to photograph them, to attack them, to cheer them, to inhale them – it hardly matters what their motives are. It is the power itself they cannot resist, the chance to get close to someone who has something they do not in hopes that some of it will rub off on them. This fascination with power has been going on forever. It is how the world works. Those who have it get to make the rules and write history, but they have to keep an eye out because power is slippery and those who do not have it are always ready to yank it out from under those who do . . .

Every now and then the powerless become powerful and nine times out of ten they turn out to be as heartless as their predecessors. And yet most of

us have this abiding hope that if only the right people can get into power and stay there, without letting their power corrupt them, then the world would be a better place. That is why we campaign for people. That is why we vote for them. Because we want them to sit at the head table and make good decisions for us.

If you ask me, the Zebedee brothers are thinking of election day in the tenth chapter of Mark's gospel. Not election day for Galilee County but God's election day, when their very own teacher Jesus would come into his own. He has just told them what that will mean for him – sure suffering and certain death – but it simply does not register. They are focused on his power, which has been evident from the very first day they met him. They could sense it even when he was not doing anything fancy – he had this gravity about him. He had power, and whatever else might happen to him along the way, they knew he was headed straight to the top – to glory – and as far as they were concerned there was no one better for the job (Barbara Brown Taylor, Bread of Angels, Cowley Publications, © 1997: 41-42).

James and John saw the opportunity to secure future power, and they sought it rather audaciously. Rather than being subtle or humble in approaching Jesus, they bluntly tell their master, “We want you to do whatever we ask of you.” Jesus hears them out, and their request reflects their recognition of him as one of future power and glory: “Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory” (10:37). They wanted a front row seat in the heavenly kingdom, and figured it was better to ask and be rejected than to not have asked at all.

But, as he did with the rich young ruler, Jesus doesn't rebuke or scold the two brothers. Rather, he tells them they do not know what they are asking for. Instead of tables and chairs at which to sit, Jesus speaks of his cup and his baptism. They say they are willing to accept those things, but they do not truly understand. The cup Jesus must drink is the cup of suffering, and the baptism he must undergo is one of death on the cross. This is what will happen to them if they choose to follow him into glory.

The other disciples cannot believe these two brothers have jumped the gun on them, and their jealousy rises. Again, Jesus does not show anger but rather compassion as he attempts to teach them what power and leadership and discipleship are truly about. Authority in God's kingdom is not handed down as it is in the secular world, by the greatest amid the hierarchies of culture. No, things are quite different in God's world. “Whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many” (10:44-45).

If you want to be great, you must be a great servant. If you want to be first, you must first be a slave. The Messiah, the Son of God, is not to be served, but is to serve those who come to him. If you wish to sit in the heavenly kingdom, you must be a humble servant through and through.

The disciples really didn't understand this concept, and to be honest we never grasp it very well, either. It runs counter to anything we have ever learned by watching the ways of our world. Rather than humility we think we need to show drive. Instead of being quiet and still we think we have to be brash and outspoken. We view the world as winners and losers, as strong and weak – and we want to be on the side of the winners. To be the greatest, we must be a great, humble servant? It just doesn't fit.

That is precisely why Jesus will not grant anything that is beyond his control or power. Notice that he doesn't even allow that option to James and John because "it is not mine to grant." Through and through, he is the servant who will not even name the one he serves, for that is the one who has the power and authority and might to love all who serve him.

Taylor continues in this way: If we do not understand it, we should not be too hard on ourselves. No one has, not really – not Peter, not James, not John, nor any of the others who were nearest and dearest to Jesus. If we understand it any better than they did, it is only because Jesus is still serving us, still feeding us, still giving himself away for us. That is the only example of power he will give us, so maybe the best we can do is to grab hold of the mystery any way we can and hang on for dear life (ibid, 44-45).

"The best we can do is to grab hold of the mystery any way we can and hang on for dear life."

That statement resonates with me after this past week. I hope you will bear with me as I share with you some of my experiences in the last seven days, and how for me, it has been a vivid reminder that the Christian journey is not about power, winners and losers, or getting our way. It is about mystery and messiness and challenges and joys – all of which are signs of God's abiding grace through Jesus Christ, our humble Lord.

Sunday, it was my honor to co-officiate at the wedding of Ashley Williams and Daniel Michaeli. Ashley is a member of our congregation, while Daniel is a member of the Jewish faith. Side-by-side, with Rabbi Lizzi Heydemann, we brought together the best of both of our faith traditions, and with integrity that mirrors Dan and Ashley, were able to celebrate God's bountiful goodness in that ceremony. It was most humbling to me when members of Dan's family spoke to me later and thanked me for our shared leadership. There was not a feeling that one tradition won out over the other. Instead, it was a mutual respect of where we each came from, and how we truly originally come from a single tribe of the Lord our God.

Monday, I sat with members of our Finance Team as we talked intentionally and deeply about our stewardship season next month. We rejoiced in the fact that the loan that we have for this sanctuary, a loan through the Presbyterian Church (USA), has now had its interest rate reduced to under 4%. This will allow us to continue making our monthly payments as we have, but will add an additional \$1500 we are paying monthly off of the loan's principal.

We also spoke of the great challenges we face in the coming year. Deaths, people moving or leaving, and other circumstances mean we are facing a potential difference in income next year of \$50,000-\$60,000. You will receive further details about this and our plans for next year on Sunday, November 1. There is anxiety amid that uncertainty, to be sure, and it is a reminder that it is in times of challenge that we need to be ever more attentive to God's calling in our lives of faith.

Tuesday I received a call from Nicole Ramey, telling me that her newborn daughter, Morgan Hope, was not expected to live due to limited brain functioning. She asked if I could come and baptize Morgan. As I and Elder John Larrick stood there with Nicole and her husband, Eric, amid the other-worldly atmosphere of the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit, I could not help but trust and rely on God's care, even when my mind questions why such things happen. As I placed the waters on Morgan's head, I proclaimed the mystery of faith that we all profess: "In life or in death, we belong to God." That evening, at the GriefShare group, the theme for the class was, "Why?" Knowing that nothing had caused Nicole or Eric or their doctors to believe something was amiss with Morgan's health, why would this happen to them? All I could do was leave it in God's hands, and trust that with time, discernment would come for them, as well as healing and peace.

Thursday, I attended a day-long workshop with Tom Markey for the Youth Ministry Grant Initiative by the Center for Congregations. Our congregation was selected to be part of this matching-grant program, and it was invigorating to consider how the faith of our youth might be further deepened and transformed by this incredible opportunity. Indeed, I believe our congregation has been, is, and will continue to be led by these men and women of faith, as we consider what it truly means to be an open, caring, community in the eyes of our Lord.

Friday, I led the funeral service for Morgan Hope Ramey. We heard from the scriptures two things that reminded me of God's eternal hope. From Psalm 71: "O God, do not be far from me, O my God, make haste to help me! But I will hope continually, and will praise you yet more and more" (Psalm 71:11-14). From earlier in Mark 10: "Jesus said, 'Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs.' And he took them up in his arms, laid his hands on them, and blessed them" (10:13-16).

Yesterday, I was in the midst of 60 high school students from Indiana and Kentucky at Pyoca Camp, Conference and Retreat Center. It was enlivening and hope-filled to see young people laughing, singing, dancing, listening and engaging with one another in meaningful conversation. It was a visible reminder of the prophet Joel's words: "I will pour out my spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions" (Joel 2:28). It reminded me that our children and youth are not the church's future; they are our present,

and we must be open to their leading according to God's Spirit just as much as any of us "old fogies."

This past week was my reminder that sometimes all we can do "is to grab hold of the mystery any way we can and hang on for dear life." These were not experiences that reflected power, or winners and losers, or someone getting their way. They were experiences of love, challenge, joy, deep sorrow, anxiety, and hope. This week reminded me that we must be willing to live the Christian faith not as the world thinks we should, but as Christ has modeled for us to live it: in humble, selfless service.

This afternoon, we will come together for a discussion on marriage. This is meant to be a time for us to listen to Scripture, the Confessions, liturgy, one another, and God's Spirit as we discern what it means to be in committed, loving relationships, whether they be heterosexual or same-gender. This discussion is also a time to help members of the Session in making a decision later this year as to how this worship space is to be used for such ceremonies in the future.

This topic is divisive. This topic is emotional. This topic is personal. And our congregation is reflective of our society right now, in that we are evenly split on what we feel is right.

We cannot view this in terms of winners and losers. We must view this through the lens of humble service before power. We must be willing to stay connected to each other, even when we disagree with one another. We must be willing to trust in God and one another, even when it is hard for us to do so. For if we only view this and other big decisions as someone gets their way or someone has won the fight, then we are no better than the sons of Zebedee who thought it was solely about reserving their seat at God's eternal table.

"Whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve."

May our lives of discipleship reflect our Lord's humble service. Thanks be to God. Amen.