



St. Andrew's By-the-Sea
The Episcopal Church
in Destin, Florida

“Even the Sons of Thunder taught love.”
22nd Sunday after Pentecost – October 20, 2024
Mark 10:35-45

A Homily by The Reverend Jo Popham

One of my daughter's best friends has a saying: “My brain doesn't always filter what comes out of my mouth.” I would say that this adage applied to two of Jesus's friends. James and John were so impulsive in the way they expressed themselves that Jesus nicknamed them “Bo-aner' ges” – “Sons of thunder.” And yet, along with Peter, the brothers were the disciples that Jesus chose to have with him on those occasions when he wanted people he could really trust. The Zebedee brothers were the closest of Jesus's friends. (In the 21st century they would be bffs.)

James and John had been taught by their best friend about the Kingdom of God and their roles in bringing about God's Kingdom here on earth. They had witnessed the transfiguration and the miracle feeding. They had seen Jesus cast out demons and heal the blind and the deaf. Jesus had told them to be salt and to be at peace with one another...and yet they dared to ask for favors from Jesus – to ask for special privileges – for places of honor over Peter... over all Jesus's disciples and followers. James and John were members of Jesus's inner circle and yet they sought special positions at the messianic banquet in heaven at the end of time (Mark 10:37). They came to our Lord and said: “Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you.” Jesus loved them. He would do anything for them. So he asked: “What is it you want me to do for you?” What do you want me to do for you? (10:36). The ‘Sons of Thunder’ said to him: “Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory.” (10:37). James and John both thought they were Jesus's right hand men. Someone's right-hand man would be their most trusted and important helper and supporter.

Clearly and undeniably Jesus's place is at the right hand of God. It is “Christ Jesus, who died... was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who intercedes for us” as Paul

wrote to the Church in Rome (Romans 8:34). Indeed Paul said to the Ephesians, Jesus would be “seated at God’s right hand in the heavenly places” (Ephesians 1:20). And in the Acts of the Apostles, Stephen “filled with the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God.” (Acts 7:55).

But what did that mean – what did that signify – in the 1st century? And would being at the left hand of God be such a bad thing? Members of the Sanhedrin – the highest of the Jewish courts – sat in a semicircle so that they might see one another while deliberating. Two clerks stood before them, the one to the right and the other to the left, to take down the votes – one to record votes of acquittal and the other votes of condemnation. One of the court clerks was the scribe that handled the arguments for acquittal and the other acted as the scribe for the arguments for conviction. Once a verdict or a judgment was reached, the Sanhedrin would announce the verdict through either of the two clerks. The clerk who handled submissions for acquittal sat on the right hand and the clerk who handled the submissions for conviction and condemnation was on the left. So when the judges reached a verdict of conviction, the left clerk will declare the judgment of conviction and the accused would be sentenced and condemned. If the council found the accused innocent or not guilty the clerk on the right declared that he is free to go. He was then set free and declared righteous.

Should we really be concerned with who will sit on the left hand of God the Father our eternal Judge? I for one am thankful that Jesus – my advocate – is on the right hand of the Court of heaven to pronounce my acquittal and declare me righteous. Were James and John too hasty when they asked to sit at Jesus’s right and left hands? Were they asking to judge the others? Or did they just want to be close to Jesus, to be with him forever - on his right hand and his left hand? Earlier the disciples had argued about which of them was the greatest (Mark 9:33-34). And when Jesus overheard them he told them: ‘Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.’ (9:36) Later he told them that if they wished to become great they must become servants, and whoever wished to be first must be slave of all.” (10:43-44).

The two impetuous disciples asked to sit next to Jesus in his glory, one on his right, one on his left. But when Jesus came into his “glory” it was not on a throne. It was on a cross, with two thieves, one on his right and one on his left. Jesus told James and John: “The cup that I drink you will drink; and with the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized.” (10:39).

Jesus’s prophecy would come to pass for James. James shared his brother’s hot-headed disposition, and they both expressed a willingness to share the cup of Christ’s sufferings. In the case of James this was realized very soon after the resurrection. According to the Book of Acts, King Herod launched a persecution of the Church and had James beheaded, thus making him the first of the twelve apostles to suffer death for the sake of Christ. Some scholars believe that John was martyred along with his brother (Acts 12:1-2). Others say that John eventually settled in Ephesus where he was responsible for the Church and had a great influence on Christian life and thought throughout the region, and that he lived to old age.

I wonder, James and John, the “Sons of Thunder,” were they also sons of entitlement? James and John worked in Jerusalem to convert the hearts of the people, yes. But, did those early Christians believe themselves to be entitled? As followers of Jesus, as his friends, do we think we are special, even exalted about others? Are we looking for glory by being his followers? Aren’t we just like James and John? Don’t we look for glory and joy and peace on the world’s terms? The other ten disciples feigned anger when they heard what James and John had asked for. But I think that Jesus saw into their hearts, just as he sees into ours. He reminded them – and us – that those who were great were tyrants – the Romans and leaders in their day were the very ones who bullied and oppressed others. Doesn’t that go on in our day as well. It is not meant to be that way, my friends. We know a better way. We can break the cycle of looking for reward, of pursuing joy, of seeking peace – at the expense of others. We must break the cycle of lusting after glory. How do we do that? Jesus taught them – and he is teaching us – by serving others. We can lose the life of serving the world on its terms by serving the people around us that

God loves so much. When Jesus spoke of giving his life as a ransom, could it be he was not speaking of the horrible death he would suffer on the cross? Could it be that the ransom that he spoke of was buying us back from a life that is defined by worldly values? Surely God did not have to punish Jesus so that God could love us. God already loves us. The ransom Jesus made was to save us from looking for love – for glory – on the world’s terms. He taught his own – and he teaches us if we are his – that we are to receive by giving. Do we believe that we are the only ones that Jesus died for? Aren’t we to reach out to those who do not know Jesus and what he did for us and for everyone? My friends, we will find our lives by caring for others, by providing for them, by giving them love – by showing them God’s love that we know through Jesus.

My brothers and sisters – and you are indeed my brothers and sisters – like James and John, and like my daughter’s best friend, sometimes we speak before we think. It is human nature. Nevertheless, we too call Jesus our best friend, and like the Zebedee brothers who sought after glory, we too have been chosen. We are to reveal God’s glory by being Jesus’s hands in the world. We are to receive by giving. We are to receive by giving with transforming generosity. Jesus was able to use the impetuous James and John to further God’s Kingdom here on earth as it is in heaven. And he can use us too.

Lord, may it be so. Amen.