

The Kingdom, Power, and Glory

Mark 10:35-45

Rev. Kathie Jackson

October 20, 2024

Parker Palmer is a well-known Quaker author, educator, and activist. In one of his books, “Let Your Life Speak” he tells the story of the time when he was assured that if he wanted it, the position of president of a small educational institution was his. He thought he wanted this position and so as a practicing Quaker he assembled a ‘clearness committee’ of trusted friends to ask him honest, open-ended questions to help discern if this was truly a vocational call.

Well into the meeting one of the questions asked was what Palmer would most like about being president. He answered by listing a series of things he would not enjoy like giving up teaching and writing, politics, and wearing a suit and tie all the time. The person who asked what should have been an easy question posed it again, “What would you most like about this position?”

Palmer said he paused a bit and then ‘gave an answer that appalled him even as he spoke it: ‘Well’ he said, in the smallest voice he possessed, ‘I guess what I’d like most is getting my picture in the paper with the word president under it.’

Palmer concludes “I was sitting with seasoned Quakers who knew that though my answer was laughable, my mortal soul was clearly at stake! They did not laugh at all but went into a long and serious silence – a silence in which I could only sweat and inwardly groan. Finally my questioner broke the silence with a question that cracked us all up – and cracked me open: ‘Parker, can you think of an easier way to get your picture in the paper?’ By then it was obvious, even to me that my desire to be president had much more to do with my ego than with the ecology of my life – so obvious that when the clearness committee ended, I called the school and withdrew my name from consideration.”

Not all of us are as honest as Palmer in admitting to letting personal ambition or striving for prestige drive our actions. It’s so tempting to try to grab for glory, to try to maneuver into a position where others will hang on our very word or recognize us as someone really special, to seek to occupy a position of privilege and power.

Last week we heard Jesus telling a rich man to give away all his possessions and then come and follow him raising questions about finding the pathway to salvation. We also heard Jesus say that all things, even the hard choices are possible with God at our side. Now, as Jesus and the disciples continue to walk along the road Jesus goes on to say that when they reach Jerusalem he will be handed over to the Gentiles; he will be mocked, whipped, and killed. He also adds that he will rise again.

I don’t know which of these statements James and John focused on as they pushed their way forward to Jesus to ask to sit on his right side and his left side, to serve as his second and third in command, to have the privilege of advising him on his chosen course of action. Maybe after hearing his dire predictions about what will happen in Jerusalem, they believe they can prevent Jesus’ suffering. Maybe after all they have seen Jesus do in the past – feed thousands, heal the sick, raise the dead they believe that Jesus will overcome even the political powers of the day. At this point they couldn’t have understood what Jesus meant when he was talking about resurrection. Who could? Still, they trust him and his power, and they want their share of that power. They are ambitious, ambitious for the reign of God. They have lived their lives watching and suffering under the world’s power as demonstrated by Rome. Now, with Jesus, they have begun to dream of a world without the hatred, violence, and oppression. They long for the Kingdom to come in glory and they believe they are ready to help Jesus usher in that very Kingdom. We want to sit at your right hand and at your left in glory they declare.

Jesus hears their desire and asks a question – “Do you really believe you are ready to live the life and die the death in the same way I will?” “We are ready!” they answer. Whatever Jesus was going to do and wherever he was going to do it, they would be at his side, and they would share in his power and glory.

Sometimes we may make somewhat similar declarations. We may not speak so boldly as to say we want to be at Jesus' right or left but we state we will be faithful followers. We resolve to stick with a friend in crisis. We promise to share what we have with others. We pledge to live honorable and just lives. Often though, when push turns to shove, the resolving and pledging are more than we can handle. The way becomes more difficult than we thought it would be. We give up. Even though we know the story, even though we know about the cross and resurrection we often turn out to be very much like the disciples when it comes to following through on our declarations of faith. It's so easy to resolve to be brave when hardship and danger aren't staring us in the face.

At least James and John were honest enough to state their desire boldly and of course this didn't set so well with the rest of the disciples. How dare James and John try to push their way to the top? It wasn't right. It wasn't fair. What made James and John so much better than all the rest of the disciples? They all had left their homes, their jobs, their families. They all deserved a chance for the favored spot. It seems that James and John were not the only ones who wanted a prestigious position; they were not the only ones seeking glory.

Jesus is headed to Jerusalem, and he is being followed by this group of power seeking, argumentative and afraid disciples. He is being followed by people who ask for the wrong things, people who act out of fear and the inability to truly understand what following Jesus really entails, people who are so very human.

There are times when we come to Jesus looking for the wrong things. "Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask." How often is that our demand? Jesus, we pray, I really think it would be great if you would just work things out the way I want. Jesus, would you please just do things the way I think they should be done. We ask, and sometimes demand that Jesus use his power, or better yet, turn his power over to us to help our lives be smooth and trouble free. And just like the disciples we sometimes fight among ourselves. Just like the disciples we often are a band of struggling, sometimes not too bright, bumbling, quarreling, and fearful followers. The surprising and wonderful truth is –Jesus did not give up on the disciples and Jesus will not give up on us.

Jesus didn't get angry with James and John or the rest of the crew and send them all home. Debbie Thomas writing in the blog "Journey with Jesus" says instead "Jesus redirects their striving for more. He offers them a radically different definition of greatness." Thomas believes that "God wants us to want more, seek more, hope more, and need more." She states that "what's lethal to spiritual life is not our striving; it's our apathy, our cynicism, our carelessness, and our complacency. Desires can be redirected. Ambitions can be purified. But my unwillingness to care? My numbness of soul? My reluctance to hope because I fear disappointment. These are the dead ends. These are the roadblocks to abundant grace and transformation." In other words, keep striving for glory if that is, you can keep in mind whose glory you are seeking.

The day will come, Jesus says that you will drink from the cup I drink, and you will be baptized with my baptism. But first you must understand that my power is not to be used to 'lord' it over others like the tyrants do. For my disciples to become great they must first learn to be a servant.

Thomas writes "the only path to success in Jesus' kingdom economy is through the surrendering of our most cherished forms of entitlement. You may aspire to glory. But recognize that glory by Jesus' definition is not gaining privilege. It's not upward mobility. It's not permission to guard, hoard, and multiply your own. Glory in God's kingdom is an exercise in subtraction. It's a movement downwards. It's a generous and perpetual giving of oneself in love."

The disciples didn't get it that day. They didn't get it the next day or the next. But still they followed and because they did Jesus took them further and further into the truth. He showed them again and again what true servanthood is all about. They didn't understand but they followed because, I believe, in spite of their fear and misunderstanding, they loved him, and they wanted to be with him. And Jesus took what they were able to offer, and he led them to Jerusalem and showed them what true love is all about. And yes, they ran away at first, but they came back to be baptized and to share the cup of servanthood.

This is your stewardship season, a time to consider what portion of your treasure you will give back to God. It is also the time to consider what parts of your life you will dedicate again in striving for the Kingdom. We cannot see what will be required of us in the future. We may not fully understand all of what Jesus asks of us in the present. But we do know this. Jesus did not give up on those first disciples and Jesus will not give up on us. Jesus heads toward Jerusalem and because we love him, because we want to be near him, because we don't want a life apart from him, we follow. Sometimes we squabble, we complain, we ask when we will stop being last and get to go to the front of the line. We wonder why the way is often hard. Sometimes we give up and sit down for a while. And then somehow God speaks to us, maybe in the voices of others, sometimes in our greatest need, often in worship, and we are reminded that the God who has the power to set the world on its foundations is the God who willingly chose the cross to demonstrate his love for us, for humankind, for creation. We are reminded again that true power and glory is found in lives of grateful service and so we pick up our cross and follow praying for thine alone O God is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever.
In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

Amen

“Let Your Life Speak” by Parker Palmer

“Journey With Jesus Blog” Debie Thomas