

Mark 10:35-45; Pentecost 21B; 10/17/21 Pastor Ellen Schoepf

I have had the opportunity of traveling to Washington DC numerous times in my life. And, each time, as I get closer to the city, I feel a certain excitement rise within me as I approach the seat of power in this country. I feel a sense of reverence as I remember our country's history. And, as I see all the monuments, the Capital building, and the White House, I feel and sense the presence of power and authority embodied in that great city.

As I studied today's reading from Mark's gospel, I thought of these experiences. You see, today we find Jesus and the disciples on their way to Jerusalem. They are nearing the end of their journey to that city which for them represents **the** ultimate place of power and authority. Jesus has been attempting to prepare the disciples for what lies ahead. However, they still seem clueless. They know Jesus keeps talking about a kingdom. They know Jesus is bringing change to their world through his proclamation that the kingdom of God is at hand. So, one can almost sense the excitement and energy escalating as they get closer to Jerusalem. After all, they are headed to the most important city in the world, at least the most important metropolis for any good Jewish man or woman. Jerusalem

is the city where the Temple stands – it is where the seat of religious authority exists, and the disciples think this is finally going to be **the** time! You see, they think the time is about to unfold when Jesus will **claim his** power and authority and take his place as the long-awaited Messiah. They are thinking Jesus will finally lead the Jewish people in a revolt that will free them from Roman rule.

I sort of understand James and John's desires. As they begin to approach Jerusalem, they know something monumental is about to take place and they want to share in that experience. They want to sit beside Jesus and hold places of power as change happens. So, they boldly say to Jesus, "Arrange it so that we will be awarded the highest places of honor in your government – one of us on your right, the other on your left." They want the most important cabinet positions. You can almost hear the sigh and sadness in the depths of Jesus' heart as he listens to their request. You can feel Jesus' sadness as he says to them, "You do not know what you are asking. Can you drink the cup that I will drink, or be immersed in the same bath that I will be immersed in?" Jesus was trying to bring them back to reality, the reality **he** was living. Yet, his response to them must have been confusing. Then Jesus said, "Come to think of it, you **will** drink

the cup I drink, and be baptized in my baptism. But as to awarding places of honor, that's not my business. There are other arrangements.”

Jesus has just spoken about the change that is coming, but it is nothing like the change the disciples are expecting and anticipating. Jesus knows those who wield power in the world will do all they can to protect themselves and their prerogatives. And, James and John have no clue that, because of their leader's boundary-breaking ministry, **rejection** and **death** will be the inevitable baptism or bath Jesus will be “plunged into!” They have no idea they, too, will share in the same baptism as they live into this coming reign of God.

The events James and John were about to see were going to be both life shattering and transforming. Yes, there will be a shift of power and authority. Yes, there will be an enthronement as Jesus assumes “kingship.” However, the **enthronement** of Jesus will be claimed when he is lifted high on a cross and dies as an utterly despised and powerless “king.” And, the two people who will share in this enthronement as Jesus fully enters into solidarity with the world, the two who will be positioned one on his right and one on his left, will be two common criminals!

Anyway, James and John desired positions of power and authority. And, when the other disciples saw this, they lost their tempers. When the ten other disciples get angry, Jesus again tries to teach them about power, the power of God's kingdom. Jesus says, "You've observed how godless rulers throw their weight around, and when people get a little power how quickly it goes to their heads." Jesus knows that power corrupts as it is wielded to **maintain** and **protect** those who hold positions of authority. He describes sociopolitical authorities who rely on coercion, on lies, and on deception to control and maintain dominance. Then, in absolute contrast to such power, he says, "It's **not** going to be that way with you. Whoever wants to be great must become a servant. Whoever wants to be first among you must be slave of all." Jesus tells them the greatness and power they will know will be measured by their ability to live as servants and slaves. This kind of greatness means suffering oppression at the hands of those who **wield** power!

The disciples' shock must have made them speechless! Who in their right mind **chooses** to become a slave? Jesus then goes on to say, "This exemplary servitude is what the Son of Man has done. He came to serve, **not** to be served – he came to give away his life in

exchange for many who are held hostage.” Well, the disciples must have thought Jesus was a bit crazy. After all, why would someone become a slave as a way of **freeing** those who are held hostage?

Jesus has been trying to tell the twelve his death will be an example of the violence and resistance to his teaching and ministry, a violence produced by those who **hold** and wield power over society. His death, this cup and baptism he is talking about, will be a radical **renunciation** of corrupt authority and privilege. And his death will **do** something. His death will be a **ransom** for many!

The Greek word used for “ransom” means **liberation** or **freedom**. What Jesus is really saying is that, through his death, God will **free** people from oppression and **captivity** to ungodly powers. God **will** restore people to membership in the community that is the kingdom of God. He makes all of this quite clear. And yet, the disciples simply do not grasp such servitude and, quite frankly, neither do we!

Power is such a subtle thing. The accumulation of power slowly turns what was once abundance and “more than enough” into necessity as we focus on trying to protect all that we have accumulated. Power turns us from living lives of service into people

who want to **be** served. However, today, we again hear that Jesus offered the world a new pattern of power and leadership. Jesus calls us to live differently as **he empowers** us with his **presence** and a **power** that is **not** to be maintained and kept. It is a power that is to be **poured out**. Our power is the **presence** of this one whose life is broken and poured into ours. And, Jesus draws us into his love so our lives can then be spun out, poured out again into the dark places where tyrants rule and are consuming all things for their own benefit.

When we follow Jesus, we give ourselves in service to Christ and in service to others, so that the **vulnerable** will be cared for and lifted up. As we do this, Jesus sends **us** to **resist** the ungodly powers, patterns, policies, and rhythms of **this** world, rhythms that intentionally let others go hungry, poor, and oppressed for the sake of our perceived safety, rhythms that are **not** a mark of faithfulness but a mark of our blindness and desire to control. Instead, we **are** **new** creatures in Christ no longer ruled by the rhythms of an unredeemed world. We have been freed **from** our captivity to ungodly powers. Hear Jesus' words to us today as he calls us to live the patterns and holy rhythms of God's kingdom, to live a new song where our very lives are extensions of God's grace and love for this broken world.