

### **Mark 10:35-45**

James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came forward to Jesus and said to him, “Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you.” And he said to them, “What is it you want me to do for you?” And they said to him, “Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory.” But Jesus said to them, “You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?” They replied, “We are able.” Then Jesus said to them, “The cup that I drink you will drink; and with the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized; but to sit at my right hand or at my left is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared.”

When the ten heard this, they began to be angry with James and John. So Jesus called them and said to them, “You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. But it is not so among you; 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. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.”

### **Haunted by Greatness**

Some of you have heard the story that, on my way to ordained ministry, I spent a lot of time pursuing a dream of becoming a professional soccer player. Whenever I hear this Gospel reading, I think of a certain part of that journey which I’d like to share with you this morning. I was playing soccer in college twenty-years ago now and in 2005, I applied to a study abroad program at the University of Oxford in England and was accepted for Hilary Term in the winter of 2006.

But here’s the rub: I wasn’t exactly going to Oxford for the academics – I wasn’t terribly interested in the studies much at all! I was going to England because I knew that you just *had to go to England* in order to be a professional footballer (or soccer player). If my feet weren’t yet good enough to get me to England, then I’d use my mind to get there and hopefully my feet would help me get my professional career started..

What’s interesting, as I look back at my adolescence and young adulthood, is that this dream to be a professional footballer never felt like it was my dream alone. It was something that I struggled with spiritually, also. It was something that I prayed about, something that I spoke to

God about, something that I felt was my calling. I was sure, during those late high school and early college years, that God was calling me to be the greatest footballer the world had ever seen. (Now, I don't know if I am genetically related to the Zebedee family that we heard about in our Gospel reading today but, like them, I know what it's like to have an abundance of self-confidence.)

Like James and John Zebedee, I was sure that God was calling me to greatness! Have you ever felt like that before? Have you ever felt like you were meant for something more? Like a typical American life seemed rather boring to you? Like you might not fit into an ordinary life very well at all? I certainly felt that way. I felt called to a life of greatness, a life of accomplishment, a life of achievement. I think a lot of young people feel that way. You might even say that I felt sure that God was calling me to be the richest and most famous soccer player in history. It sounds funny now, but I was working quite hard toward that goal for many, many years.

And when I went to Oxford, greatness surrounded me at every turn. You don't have to look very far to see the Wren Tower at Christ Church College or where Roger Bannister ran that first four-minute mile. I worshiped in the church where Thomas Cranmer, the author of the first two Books of Common Prayer, was dragged down from the pulpit to be martyred in the street in 1556. CS Lewis and JRR Tolkien hung out at the Eagle and Child Pub. And the Bodleian Library in Oxford has early copies of the Magna Carta and many of Jane Austen's manuscripts. What an incredible place – a place filled with greatness!

All of that is to say that I don't have any trouble relating to James or John Zebedee – followers of Jesus who are working hard and making sacrifices, but who also think that Jesus might – you know – take care of them in his administration.

It's so easy to see this happening, isn't it. You can imagine these two brothers following Jesus, comparing themselves to other disciples, feeling like they deserve a special place when his revolution happens, coming up with a plan to approach him when the moment is right. Isn't that what happens today in politics or in business.

“Look, we're with you in all of this, Jesus, and it hasn't been easy, but you're going to need to do something for us when you make it. Promise us here and now that we can sit, one at your left hand and one at your right, when you take back your throne.”

(In Matthew's Gospel, it gets even better because they don't have the gumption to ask Jesus themselves. *They send their mother to ask for them!*)

Jesus' response could not be more gracious and kind and inviting, though the other disciples are furious when they hear that James and John have been posturing for privileges once again! So, finally, Jesus gathers everybody around him:

“Hey guys, come over here, this is something that each and every one of you need to hear. You know how it is with the Gentiles. You know how it is with the Romans. You know how it is with the Chief Priests. You know how it is in Washington and election time is coming fast. You know how their great ones are tyrants over them and how they Lord their power over each other. *It's not to be so among you. It's not to be so among my followers,*” Jesus says. “If you want to be great, that's fine, but greatness in my Kingdom means you're going to have to serve somebody. **Greatness to God means to give you life away.**”

So many people at so many different times modeled this truth to me in those years that eventually it got through. And I know that so many people that you have known and loved and learned from have demonstrated to you what greatness truly looks like and how it's powerful to serve. It's powerful to give. It's powerful to voluntarily suffer. It's powerful to love as Christ loves us – he who gives his life away that we may find life and abundant life at that!

When we encounter this Christ and his empire of service and the might of his gentleness, it reveals *to us* the pride and ego and posturing that we've been doing all along. He reveals to us the tyranny of our souls and liberates us from thinking that life is about wealth or fame or power or violence or somehow ruling over other people. Christ reveals grace and truth and humility to us all the time to invite us into a new politics, a new way of understanding what's most important.

It's a shift that I felt recently, after Hurricane Helene, when driving around in the wake of the storm. I don't know if you noticed but there seems to be a slight increase in political signage lately (I'm not sure what that could be about!) I'm talking especially about the large signs with a lot of words which always end with “Vote for Democrats” or “Vote for Republicans.” I know that freedom of speech is important. I understand that many of the issues being debated matter greatly. And yet, after the hurricane, when so many people were struggling and many still are, and when so many neighbors cared for each other and people took time to check on one another and offer their time and their donations. The hurricane made a mockery of those political signs by forcing us all to step into a way of understanding the preciousness of life and how every neighbor we have is invaluable to us and how the chance to serve and be there for each other is one of the greatest gifts God has ever given us. Those are the politics we are all longing for – that's what greatness really looks like – and those are the politics being given to us in Jesus Christ.

“So, if you want to be great,” Jesus says, “That’s fine, many have felt that way before, but greatness in my Kingdom means you’re going to have to serve one another. Whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all.” Amen.