

A Sermon for DaySpring  
 By Eric Howell  
*Baptismal Grace of Humility and Service*  
 Mark 10.35-45  
 October 20, 2024

In today's gospel reading, we hear a call to humility and a call to service. While this is not surprising for a teaching of Jesus, it's not convenient at all, either. Human nature is not bent toward humility or particularly toward costly service. Human nature strains to achieve its own glory. It wants to increase, go higher, get bigger, be applauded. So, we have to keep on the lookout for opportunities to practice humility and service, to cultivate these in our lives.

"Can we sit on thrones next to you?" two brothers ask Jesus. It's human nature. That's not to say that every person is all the time ambitious. Sometimes, we just want to sit on the sofa and eat cheese. But we can see this drive all around, especially in an election season when candidates and their minions fill our eyes and ears incessantly with messages of their greatness and the opponent's vast, decrepit unworthiness. And very soon, each person who votes will stand in a booth, all alone, and exercise some small measure of power, hoping that enough others will use their power in the same way so that things go their way. It's human nature played out millions of times behind little curtains over the course of two or three weeks.

Somehow, though, the gospel just resists tracking with this flow. It doesn't dance to this music. It doesn't swing in this orbit. Something about the gospel and the way of the gospel goes down, not up.<sup>8</sup>

Goes quiet, not loud.

Goes humble, not proud.

Decreases, not increases.

Gets smaller, not bigger.

John the Baptist understood this: "He must increase, I must decrease."

The poet Tennyson got a hold of it: "Ah for a man to arise in me, that the man I am may cease to be."

Over and over, we see this pattern in the gospels and in the lives of the saints, and it never fails to be totally challenging and exasperating to the normal, satisfying way of being and striving and contesting for power in the world.

Blessed are the poor in spirit? Blessed are the peacemakers? Blessed are you when other hate you and revile you on my account? Whoever wishes to be great must be your servant?

It's a different way of being in the world, that's for sure.

Two brothers, among the closest disciples of Jesus, come to him. “Would you do something for us?” Just before this they heard him say, “We’re going to Jerusalem, and I’ll be delivered to the rulers and will be condemned to death. And after three days, I will rise.”

Not apparently hearing, “I will be condemned to death,” they only had, “I will rise,” ringing in their ears, and in that, they saw a future for themselves. “Do something for us. We want to sit at your left and at your right in glory.”

This is a kind of logic, a world mentality to which we are always tempted: to experience everything and judge everything by its capacity to feed our ambition. How can this thing serve me? The quest to satisfy the insatiable ego can become a spiritual malady, masquerading even behind good intentions. On one hand, the brothers’ request is to be in proximity to Jesus; on the other, they are thinking big thoughts about thrones for themselves. How can we sort this out?

In his book [\*Let Your Life Speak\*](#), Parker Palmer tells how he was offered the presidency of a small college. He wanted the job and thought he should take it. Nevertheless, given his Quaker tradition, he sought spiritual direction from his friends. Their job wasn't to give him any advice but instead to ask him honest, open-ended questions so that Palmer could discern his vocational call for himself.

Halfway through this three-hour meeting, a friend asked Palmer what he would like most about being president. He mentioned several things he would not enjoy, like wearing a tie, at which his friend pointed out that he wasn't answering the question. Palmer paused, thought a bit, then he writes how he "gave an answer that appalled even me as I spoke it: 'Well,' I said, in the smallest voice I possess, 'I guess what I'd like most is getting my picture in the paper with the word 'president' under it.'"

He concludes: "I was sitting with seasoned [friends] 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 all of us 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." He withdrew his name from the search.

Parker Palmer isn't a bad person; he's just more honest than most of us and more humble than most.

The two brothers who come to Jesus have boldness, but that's not necessarily a problem. The brothers have enthusiasm, but that's not a problem either. They desire proximity to Jesus, again not a problem. But, like the rich young ruler, they lack one thing. “Sell the thing

you have and give it away to the poor.” Jesus is the ultimate servant and calls his disciples to be servants next to him.

There are opportunities for humility and service every day, they’re just not often convenient. Tomorrow morning at about 8:00, early voting begins in Texas which means that for some of us, this gospel story is the last gospel story you’re going to hear before you cast your vote. A story of people seeking thrones but being told to be servants. What a great story for people who are seeking to run the country. Remember you may be commanders, and you may be chiefs, but you’re first of all public servants.

It's quite a bit of a less convenient story when it hits closer to home as a story for those who are doing the voting. One of the things you have that you can give away, one of the ways that you can serve, is with that one little vote you have. It’s an opportunity for the spiritual disciplines of humility and service. The ballot you’ll have in front of you will have many choices to make for various offices. You probably have strong, fully formed opinions about some of them. You probably have no idea about the candidate or even the job description for others. Do you know what the railroad commissioner does? Spoiler: nothing to do with railroads apparently.

I can’t tell you how to vote, of course. All I can say is this: Jesus is not on the ballot. Also, Jesus is not casting a vote. But you are. And in Jesus name, by the power of the baptism with which you have been baptized, you are called to be a servant, not a master, not to be first but to be last, not to gain power over others, but to use any power for others, then lay it down and be the servant of all.

There’s no clear direction here, I suppose, but you have the opportunity to cast a vote with the needs of someone in mind who is completely unlike you, to vote on behalf of them, even if it’s not what you would naturally be inclined to do if it were only for your benefit and perspective. This is humility. This is an act of service. How would the experience of voting and spirituality of servanthood, not to mention how you feel about your neighbor, or that uncle at the Thanksgiving table, be made different from a simple act: bring with you into the voting booth the face, name, needs of someone whose life is utterly different from yours and use a vote on behalf of that person’s life, even if you don’t understand it. For someone who sees the world through eyes that are not your own. Whatever else this may be, it is an act of humility and a small, though perhaps agonizing, act of service. Which Jesus says has something to do with the gospel--everything to do with the gospel. You’re not just trying to elect leaders who are public servants; you are practicing servanthood in the act of taking part in an election. I don’t know how to predict how it changes elections, but it could change us into people who breathe a little easier, who practice a little generosity, and who do something small but sacrificial on behalf of someone else.

So if you’re young, take into the booth with you someone who’s much older and sees the world differently. If you’re wealthy, take with you someone who’s living on the edge.

If you're a man, take the concerns of a woman. If you're comfortable, take with you someone afraid for the future. If you do this, in the mysterious way in which he moves, Jesus is in the voting booth with you. And your vote and the way you feel about it all will be made much more complicated.

Practicing solidarity with the needs and concerns of others is an act of service that takes you out of yourself. It is the voting equivalent of washing someone else's feet. Isn't this the posture of Jesus? Always? Humility and service.

The brothers want to talk about crowns and thrones. Jesus wants to talk about cups to drink and baptism. Jesus asks us to immerse ourselves compassionately in the lives of others: when we have enough to eat or a place to live, think about the people for whom Jesus has compassion. And let us have compassion and live in service. Let us look at the crucified Lord, completely immersed in our wounded history, and there, we see God's way. He did not remain up above in heaven to look down on us down here but lowered himself to wash our feet. God is love, and love is humble.

The Orthodox theologian Olivier Clement writes, "Life in the spirit means gradually becoming aware of baptismal grace, and this awareness transforms the whole person. Each present moment has to become baptismal: a moment of anguish and death if I seek to cling to it, but a moment of resurrection if I accept it humbly as 'present' in both senses of the word."

Service to others is the source of strength that helps us to move with Jesus. It is the strength of baptism that immersion in Jesus that moves us to follow him instead of seeking our own interests, to put ourselves at the service of others in his name. This is grace, a fire that the Spirit kindles in us that needs to be nurtured. Today—especially today, let us ask the Holy Spirit to renew baptismal grace in us, the immersion in Jesus, in his way of being, to be like servants, to be servants like he has been with us.

Let this gospel passage and the celebration of baptism we are in a few moments to participate in—let these remain with us as a call to conversion, that we may with courage and generosity drink deeply from the cup of life and be immersed completely, deeply, fully in the baptism of Christ's love.

Amen.