

22 Pentecost, Proper 24, Yr. B
October 21, 2018
Hebrews 5:1-10; Mark 10:35-45

Once again, our readings address central questions – questions about how we humans search for security, often in the wrong places. There are questions about wealth and power and service and our relationships with God and one another. We come in on the Mark reading, just after the rich young man walked away from Jesus because he found the invitation to leave his wealth behind too demanding, and right after Jesus predicts his passion and death for a third time. And maybe part of being human is selective hearing – you’ll remember last week when the disciples, wondering who could be saved, said something like, “HEY, what about us? Look at everything we’ve given up to follow you!” And Jesus answers that those who leave their families and properties will have more brothers and sisters and more properties – WITH PERSECUTIONS. So, here we have James and John, walking along with a Messiah who’s told them he’s going to be crucified, but they seem to have missed the bit about persecutions. Seemingly, they only have power and glory in mind. To their credit, they DO seem to be a bit abashed about asking for that power and glory straight out so, like little kids, they try to extract a promise ahead of time: TEACHER, WE WANT YOU TO DO FOR US WHATEVER WE ASK OF YOU. (It’s worth noting here that when Matthew tells this same story, he sanitizes James and John somewhat by having their MOTHER ask for the positions for them.)

Jesus’ response seems a little like bait-and-switch, I think. He doesn’t respond to their request at first, just asks them if they can drink the cup of suffering that he’s going to drink and in almost pathetic eagerness, they assure him that they can: WE ARE ABLE they say. But then he says to them, well, I actually can’t give you the right and left positions, but I CAN give you the cup to drink. You have to feel sorry for them, don’t you? And, of course, it’s worth noting that the other disciples aren’t any better – they were just angry that James and John got in there ahead of them. So, if we’re using the Bible as a mirror, as a way to understand ourselves and the temptations that beset humans, here we have it. In just those few verses

we've got obtuseness, craftiness, ambition, greed, bravado, jealousy, anger and resentment. One might forgive Jesus if he just gave up at this point, but he uses it as an opportunity to teach. He turns to them and talks about power. That power isn't about ruling over someone or getting our own way or being a tyrant – no, he says, it's about being a servant. Like me, he says, like me, because I came not to be served, but to serve. I came to give my life for a ransom for many. The word ransom in Greek means to “untie.” I'm going to show you God's way – I'm going to untie you from the human ideas of fake security and from the lonely and ultimately useless quest for power and glory.

So let's talk about power. Why do we want it? Power in itself is necessary, because without it, nothing gets done. And power, like wealth, by itself is neutral. It's what you do with it that makes all the difference because what gets done can be either good or bad, can either further God's kingdom or not. And of course, the seductive nature of power means that when we have it, we want to keep it. It also means, you'll remember Lord Acton saying, that power can corrupt and that absolute power can corrupt absolutely. Why do you suppose? Maybe it's because when we have that kind of power we're tempted to forget the truth – that we are finite and will die no matter what, and that power won't ultimately save us; or maybe that kind of power enables us to live as if we were independent from everyone else and tempts us to act only in our own self-interest; or maybe it has the capacity to blind us to our real motives, so we can convince ourselves that we need to keep and expand our power but only, of course, so that we can do more good with it. One Roman Emperor put it quite succinctly: **NOW I CAN DO WHAT I LIKE AND TO ANYONE I CHOOSE.** Such are the “rewards” of power and prestige.

All of this is, I think, part of being human. We can go back to the story of Adam and Eve – remember the serpent's suggestion? If you eat this, you'll be like God. There it is, the temptation to power and glory right from the beginning. Someone has said that each of us has a Zebedee gene in our DNA. And it tempts us to want power over others - we can see that from the playground to the boardroom. A little aside here, when I took the Bjorklunden course on the EU this past summer, part of the conversation

was about Brexit. The diplomat who had worked with the EU said that thought Brits voting to leave the EU had watched too much Downton Abbey. And I commented that, while we all probably identified with the upstairs folks in that show, the reality would have been that most likely we'd have been classed with those downstairs – with the servants.

We've talked before that many Jews, probably including the disciples, felt that when the Messiah came all kinds of good things would happen. The main one was that Rome would be defeated and Israel would become great again. Coercive power – “hard power” in today's language. But you'll remember that there was an alternative vision, the one expressed by Isaiah, the one about the suffering servant. Here the thought was that the central tragedy of Israel was its refusal to do God's will. That Israel was caught in a cycle of sin leading to calamity. In spite of priests offering sacrifices of atonement and prophets preaching, things hadn't changed. Underlying this analysis was a theology that said that there was a divine moral order in the universe, having to do with justice and righteousness, and that sin and its consequences upset that order requiring that something had to be done to get everything back on track. What was needed, thought Isaiah, was a person, a servant, who followed God's vision of the divine order so faithfully that he made his very life an instrument of God's healing. The vision was of a human being who would do God's will, regardless of temporal power, and who would find the highest expression of human dignity in expressing solidarity with fellow human beings. It's an entirely different view of what power is about – power is REAL and it's to be used to bring peace and harmony. That was to be Israel's vocation – to so live a spiritual wholeness so as to become a light to all the nations. To live so that they were an example of the fact that patience was stronger than aggression, compassion was stronger than self-assertion, love was stronger than hate.

Sometimes when we think about all this, I think we're tempted to think that this all sounds quite wonderful, but it's not for us – some super holy person, maybe, but not me. In that regard, I'd like to talk about two things. The first is the film we watched last week about Fred Rogers. He wasn't all that different from any one of us. He had talent; he was well educated. Those

things gave him power. It was what he did with that power that was so inspiring. He looked at the mess of children's television, which was producing "entertainment" that was violent, destructive, that saw humiliation as funny. And he thought, "You know, I can do something about that." And so he did, using television to preach a different message – one about compassion and empathy and goodness. Towards the end of the film he said a couple of things. One was that the fundamental idea of Christianity is that everyone has inherent value and that we were called, no matter what our job was, to live that out, to use our work to show the deeper message that our REAL job was to care for each other. What changes the world, he said, was when someone gets the idea that love can abound and that it can be shared. In his conversation, he used the Hebrew phrase, tikkun olam – to heal the world.

At about the same time, my college freshman grandson sent me a text. He's taking a history class and they were discussing the Reformation. "Gram," the text read, "Could you explain the differences between John Calvin and Martin Luther to me?" Hmm. I'll tell you that that one sent me back to the books. I found some differences, but what I found that I'd like to share with you this morning, is that they both believed in what they called the priesthood of all believers. All of us, every single one of us, called to be a priest.

We don't ordinarily think that way, but the thought is a crucial one. The literal definition of the word "priest" is "bridge." In the Hebrews reading, we read about Jesus as the ultimate High Priest. Jesus was that person who had one foot in heaven and one on the earth. He knew what God his father was like and used that knowledge to understand the world and how to live in the world. He used that knowledge to make God present in the world, to show us God's face – a face full of love, compassion and joy – and God's heart, a heart that wants healing, forgiveness, reconciliation and love. Jesus, as priest, is the mediator, the connector, between heaven and earth, the bridge over which we all are invited to travel. So each of us, as priest, is to be the same. Bridges, reconcilers, healers. Through our baptism, that's our vocation. And through that baptism, we're given all the power, vision and grace to be what we're called to be. Standing in the middle,

bridging the gaps, perhaps between family members, or between red and blue constituencies, in the gaps between rich and poor, black and white, oppressed and bigoted. Reconciling, bridging, healing the world with generosity and love. So, with our feet on the earth, but with our compelling understanding coming from heaven, we can be those priests that form living bridges. I've been using the image of having one foot in heaven and one on earth. Perhaps a better image is having our feet firmly planted on earth and our fingertips hanging on to heaven. With that image, we offer our very bodies as bridges for others. Pushing that metaphor a bit, we can think we may end up with a bit of a backache, but it'll be worth it in the joy we'll receive, both now and eternally. Amen.