

I talked to someone recently who was telling me about their struggle with cancer. She told me that even though she had done right in life and tried to make good choices about diet and exercise, nonetheless she got sick, and what's fair about that? I imagine if I were in her situation, I would feel the same way, because despite all my preaching to you about grace, I still think of life as a merit-based system, where rewards come for good choices and punishments for bad ones. And I don't think I'm alone in that. James and John are hoping to get their reward from Jesus for all the good choices they've made.

Just before today's reading, Jesus makes his third and final passion prediction in which he explains once again to the disciples that he will be handed over to the authorities in Jerusalem. They will ridicule him, spit on him, torture him, and murder him, and after three days he will rise again. It's immediately after that when James and John approach Jesus and audaciously say, "Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask!" It's an incredible request, isn't it? It's like a child going to their parent. Promise you'll say yes to whatever I ask. I want to see Jesus put James and John in their place, but he simply responds, "What do you want me to do for you?" That's a really important question, one we'll hear him ask next week as well. It's a question we all should answer. What do you want Jesus to do for you? Do you want healing, forgiveness, welcome? Do you want hope? What do you really want?

James and John answer, "Allow one of us to sit on your right and the other on your left in your glory." In other words, we want power. We want top cabinet positions in your new administration. After all, we were early contributors to your campaign, and we think we've earned it. Despite all Jesus' teaching that the first will be last, and the last will be first, James and John are still looking to be first. Jesus responds, "You don't know what you're asking! Can you drink the cup I drink or receive the baptism I receive?" "We can," they answered.

That's the second question Jesus asks that we should ask ourselves. "Can you drink the cup?" The cup Jesus is referring to is the cup of suffering, his willingness to be tortured and killed. This is what's in front of Jesus, but all James and John can think about is glory. It's interesting that the male disciples in Mark never get the point. They are so fixated on power as control, that Jesus' teaching of power as service goes right over their heads. In Mark, it's only the women disciples who follow Jesus to the end, and it's only the marginalized who understand Jesus' kingdom message. In fact, the men appear so foolish in Mark, you wonder why Jesus doesn't just tell them off? But he doesn't. Once again, we see that Jesus doesn't deal in shame—ever. He doesn't insult those who don't understand. He redirects them in the hope that eventually they will see.

James and John think they deserve to share in Jesus' glory. These two brothers, the sons of Zebedee, gave up their positions as first and second in command in their father's fishing business, leaving their wealth and security to follow Jesus. They did what the rich young man last week could not do, so they think they are in line for a promotion. Jesus asks, can you drink this cup of suffering I'm about to drink? Yes, we can, they say. Interestingly, Jesus actually agrees with them, saying, "You will drink the cup I drink and receive the baptism I receive, but

to sit at my right or left hand isn't mine to give. It belongs to those for whom it has been prepared."

Even though they don't understand what they are asking for, Jesus says they will taste of his suffering before it's over. According to the book of Acts, James would be killed by Herod nine years later for his witness to Christ. And while John is the only 1 of the 12 would live into old age, he too knew his share of suffering. We all do, and I think that's the point Jesus is making. In one form or another, we all drink from the cup of suffering. That's a given. The question is, how will we respond to it? When suffering comes our way, how many of us think, how could God do this to me? After all I've done for you, God, this is how you reward me? Deep down, most of us think that life is a merit-based system, where God rewards the good and punishes the bad, which means that suffering should only come to those who deserve it. But Jesus makes it clear that suffering is baked in. It's not a fluke or a flaw. It's part of being human. Eventually, we all will drink the cup. If the Human One suffered, why should we expect it to be different for us?

When the other disciples find out what James and John asked for, they get all hot and bothered, presumably because they want top spots in the cabinet and wish they'd asked first. So, Jesus explains to them and to us:

You know that the ones who are considered the rulers by the Gentiles show off their authority over them and their high-ranking officials order them around. But that's not the way it will be with you. Whoever wants to be great among you will be your servant.

To be great is to serve. It's that simple, and it's easy to look at the disciples and think, why didn't these guys get it? But how many of us really believe that service is the path to greatness? Most of us are still trying to get and maintain power, while claiming that Jesus is our Lord. Most of us are every bit as power hungry as these disciples, and Jesus doesn't shame or yell at us. Instead, he serves us, in the hope that one day, we might see that the only power that matters in the end is the power of love.

James and John say they want to sit at Jesus right and left when he enters his glory. Presumably the glory they have in mind is when Jesus overthrows the government in Jerusalem and ushers in a new era. We know that's not how the story goes, but let me ask you this, when do you think Jesus enters his glory? I think most of us would say either on Easter or perhaps when he ascends to heaven. Like James and John, when we hear the word "glory" we think it has something to do with victory and winning, so resurrection and ascension are good guesses. Yet by the end of Mark's Gospel, there are two people at Jesus right and left as he enters his glory. It's the two thieves on the cross. This is Mark's subtle way of telling us that the cross is the glory of Christ. How can that be?

Jesus said, “The Human One didn’t come to be served but rather to serve and to give his life to liberate many people.” Jesus says his death on the cross will set us free. How does that work? What’s freeing about an innocent man’s execution? To die on a cross in the first century was the ultimate experience of human shame. It was considered the most shameful death anyone could undergo. Jesus willingly enters this shame. He takes the worst human beings have to offer, all our bigotry and hatred, our projection and our self-preservation, he takes it all into himself, and he absorbs it. He drinks the cup of our wrath. From the cross, he says, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” Have you ever felt abandoned by God? Jesus did, all the while remaining God’s beloved child, in whom God is well-pleased.

The glory of the cross is the revelation that God is in the whole of our human experience—the winning and the losing, the best and worst, the presence and the absence, power and weakness—God is in it all. To know this is to be set free. The glory of the cross is that it puts to death the merit system, where we think if we just do enough good things, we’ll avoid the bad ones. To know this is to be set free, free from the tyranny of thinking that our suffering is earned. The glory of the cross is that it reveals a God who is so for you that there is no length to which God will not go to assure you that you are not alone. Jesus’ glory is not a glory that is free from suffering, but one that includes it, and that means your suffering is included too. It’s not an aberration or a punishment. It’s part of being human. When you drink the cup, may you know that God is with you in your suffering. When you drink the cup, may you know that God is for you, and has always been on your side.