

THE GREATEST
Mark 10:35-45
October 18, 2009

They say that confession is good for the soul, so I begin this morning with reporting to you that two weeks ago I was tempted to backslide into the McZebedee sin-drome.

Not familiar with the McZebedee sin-drome?

It is the temptation to think of yourself as more important than you are because of whom you are *with* rather than what *you do*.

My slippage occurred when EDCC was hosting the Justice Revival pre-event luncheon. I knew that I was invited to sit at the head table as host pastor, but when the initial seating chart was emailed to us, they had placed me between the Rev. Jim Wallis and Mayor Tom Leppart.

Now for those of you who are just getting to know the name Jim Wallis—in clergy circles he is A Big Name. He gets to hang out in Washington D.C. with all the Big Named Power People in our government. He was the keynote speaker at our General Assembly in Ft. Worth 3 years ago. And he is an author whose works I have read and respected for years.

And I was going to get to sit at his right hand!

And not only that—I was going to get to sit at the left hand of our mayor. Now to be honest, I didn't vote for Tom Leppart. There was another candidate who was running that I supported with my vote, and really wanted him to win—our own Max Wells, long-time member of this congregation. Still, this was my first opportunity to meet the current Mayor of Dallas, who has a high profile in our fair city.

For just a moment, I succumbed to feeling very self-important because of whom I was to be seated by. That's the McZebedee sin-drome.

Alright—another confession—you won't find the McZebedee sin-drome in any psychology or theology textbook. In fact, I just coined the term for today's sermon.

However, if you overheard the scripture, then you know that James and John, the sons of Salome and Zebedee, or McZebedee, if we were in Scotland, were struggling with the same misunderstanding of power--Jesus' power.

In some ways, their confusion is understandable. It is a part of the human condition to be drawn to people with charisma. It is part of the human condition to be drawn to those whose self-confident, authoritative word is followed and acted upon.

Most of us don't feel we have that power, so if we could just position ourselves to be near those sources of powerful light, then perhaps the glow of the power-person will shine on us, and others will think we're "all that," too. We think we gain power because of the powerful people with whom we are associated.

That's what James and John were suggesting when they took Jesus off to the side in this morning's scripture. "Excuse us, teacher," they cajoled. "We want you to do whatever we ask you to do for us."

I don't know what they felt they had on Jesus. He was already telling people he was the son of God. Maybe the Sons of Zebedee, who were also known as the Sons of Thunder, were Jesus' bodyguards—and they felt he owed them eternal protection. Maybe since they had left their livelihoods behind to follow Jesus, and found themselves in peril with the law because of Jesus, they felt they deserved better compensation. Maybe they just wanted a raise.

How Jesus had the patience to deal with them—and eventually the other 10 disciples—is beyond me. The nerve! The gall!

But Jesus just smiled and asked them, "Ok, guys, what is that you want me to do for you?"

“When you get to be the Big Cheese, the Main Guy, the Head Honcho—we want to be right next to you, on either side. When all the press show up to take their pictures and write their articles, we want our faces to be right next to yours so that people will know who we are.”

Jesus just shook his head and said, “You don’t know what you’re asking.”

Right about then, the other ten disciples came around and overheard the conversation. They all got upset at James’ and John’s secret political lobbying, and a huge verbal fight broke out amongst the 12, all jockeying for position. “I deserve to be next to Jesus—no I deserve to be.”

This discussion echoed one that had occurred earlier in the gospel of Mark. We go back to Chapter 9:1, when the disciples really saw the light of who Jesus was. That chapter begins with the transfiguration of Jesus when he went up on a mountain and was transfigured into something un-earthly, surrounded by a bright light. Out of that light appeared Moses and Elijah, and Jesus conversed with the two of them.

Peter, James and John were the only disciples present to witness the transfiguration, and they were awed by the power that seemed to radiate from Jesus. It was not long after that event, in chapter 9:33, that the first conversation occurred about who among the 12 was eligible to be the greatest disciple next to Jesus. Jesus said at that time, “If anyone would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all.” And then he took a child, and put him in the midst of them and said to them, “Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me; and whoever receives me, receives not me but the one who sent me.” Jesus visually illustrated that it was not to those who had the most worldly power that they must gravitate, but to those who were seen to have the least earthly power that they must emulate.

Yet here they were again, arguing about who would be situated closest to the seat of power, which was Jesus.

Ah, but that’s where they had it wrong. Jesus wasn’t going to be “seated” anywhere. He wasn’t going to be posed on a throne with his attendants on

either side of him like the Roman seat of power. He said, "You know that those who are supposed to rule over the Gentiles lord it over them and their great men exercise authority over them. But it shall not be so among you; whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of man came not to be served but to serve."

Jesus' definition of power is antithetical to the way we humans order ourselves into hierarchy. We're kind of crazy, when you really think about it. First, we give away our own power, then imbue people with authority, to be CEOs or Presidents or Kings and Queens, and then we jockey for position around them. That's the way we've organized ourselves since the beginning of time. We really can't blame the disciples for not getting it the first, or even the second time.

But Jesus reminded them that they had the power within themselves—and that their God-given power needed to be used on behalf of those who were overlooked and oppressed by those who had worldly power.

He also reminded them that their power was not to be seated on some throne or capitol hill, but was to be on the move, like HE was on the move, amongst the people, not above them.

There are two challenges from today's scripture that I want us to take home and ponder.

First, Jesus teaches that each one of us is empowered by God. Each of us has power to make a difference in our little corners of the world. Yet too many of us give that power away. Too many of us think we're not worthy, not good enough.

In his 1994 Inaugural address, Nelson Mandela quoted Marianne Williamson with a now familiar challenge that I'm sure you've heard and/or read before when he said:

"Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness, that frightens us most. We ask ourselves, 'Who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous,

talented, and famous?' Actually, who are you not to be? You are a child of God. Your playing small does not serve the world. There is nothing enlightened about shrinking so that people won't feel insecure around you. We were born to make manifest the glory of God that is within us. It's not just in some of us; it's in all of us. And when we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same. As we are liberated from our own fear, our presence automatically liberates others."

That's what Jesus was talking about. That's how Jesus wants us to roll.

The second thing Jesus teaches us is that the power we have been given is to be acted upon, not sat upon. It is not a throne power, but an owned power—shared with those who are barred from the worldly seats of power

Jesus constantly used the phrase, "Those who would be first among you must be last of all and servant to all." Those who are truly great and powerful in God's realm are those who use their power to serve others.

There have, over time, been those who have risen to worldly power who have understood Jesus' mandate. During the American Revolution a man in civilian clothes rode past a group of soldiers repairing a small defensive barrier. The leader of the work group was shouting instructions, but making no attempt to help them. Asked why by the rider, he retorted with great dignity, "Sir, I am a corporal!" The stranger apologized, dismounted, and proceeded to help the exhausted soldiers. The job done, he turned to the corporal and said, "Corporal, next time you have a job like this and not enough men to do it, go to your commander-in-chief, and I will come and help you again." With that George Washington got back on his horse and rode off.

Almost 100 years later lived another man who had power and position, this time as a Bishop in a very large denomination. The man was named Samuel Brengle, and he left a fine position to join William Booth's Salvation Army in England. At first General Booth accepted his services reluctantly and grudgingly. Booth said to Brengle, "You've been your own boss too long." So in order to instill humility in Brengle, he made him work by cleaning the boots of other trainees.

Discouraged, Brengle said to himself, "Have I followed my own fancy across the Atlantic in order to black boots?" Then, as in a vision, he saw Jesus bending over the feet of rough, uneducated fishermen. "Lord," he whispered, "you washed their feet; I will black their shoes."

Samuel Brengle went on to establish the Salvation Army in America. Just before his death Brengle sent out a short memo to all of his top leaders. This memo had one single word written on it: "Others."

Jesus taught us through the scripture this morning, that each one of us is empowered by God, given some arena of influence by God. How we use that power and influence is our choice—but Christ's call is to use that power for the good of others.

When James and John asked to be in Jesus' limelight, he said to them, "You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or to be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized?" And they answered him, "We are able."

And true, they would be able, but only after they saw what it really meant to be on Jesus' left and right hands. For on a day that was to come for them, Jesus hung from a middle cross, flanked on the left and on the right by men being punished for crimes unknown.

What does it truly mean to have the power of Christ? It's scary. No wonder so many of us defer the honor God has given us, and place it upon the shoulders of others.

The second verse of a familiar hymn lays it out plain and clear:

"Are you able to relinquish / Purple dreams of power and fame/ To go down into the garden / Or to die a death of shame?"

Now the refrain. James? John? Anyone? Are any of us willing and able to be the greatest God has made us to be?(ending from the end of Stephan Chapman's sermon—Duke Divinity School)