

Matthew 20:17–28
Wed. of Reminiscere
Kaiserslautern Ev. Luth. Ch.
February 28, 2024

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dearly bought hearers by the blood of Jesus Christ,

This evening we consider Christian humility in light of a counter example, the request of James and John to sit in a position of power and authority at our Lord's right and left hands in His Kingdom. Just one chapter earlier, in Matthew 19:28, Jesus said to the disciples: "Truly, I say to you, in the new world, when the Son of Man will sit on His glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or *mother* or children or lands, for my name's sake, will receive a hundredfold and will inherit eternal life." Ironically, in Matthew's account of these events, it's the mother of James and John, Salome, who comes seeking a position of prominence for her sons. But we aren't told that the sons are rolling their eyes or hiding in embarrassment at their mother's request. In Mark's account we are told that James and John were also right there making their request. It is also *their* desire to claim a position of honor in the coming Kingdom. They don't yet understand that those who exalt themselves will be humbled and those who humble themselves will be exalted. They don't yet understand the true glory of Christ. So Jesus uses this opportunity to teach us, His disciples, a lesson in Christian humility.

James and John desired a place of prominence in the Kingdom. They wanted to sit on the right and left sides of the throne of God. And what mother wouldn't want her sons to be honored? Oh if they only knew what they were truly asking for! Jesus answered: "You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I am to drink?" Jesus is referring to

the cup of God's wrath, the bitter agonies and isolation He would experience in His sufferings and death. Jesus had just explained how He would be delivered over to the chief priests and scribes, condemned to death, delivered to the Gentiles to be mocked and flogged and crucified, but then on the Third day raised. Jesus Himself would ask, that if possible, this cup would be taken away from Him. Were James and John courageous enough to suffer as Jesus does, being led silently like a Lamb to the slaughter?

In the Gospel of Mark, Jesus asks another question? Are you able "to be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized?" Here, Jesus is not referring to baptism by water or fire, but baptism by blood. Since the early church, martyrdom, or witnessing to the faith by laying down one's life has been described as "baptism in blood." The image is clear. The liturgical color for a martyr's day is red as a reminder of shed blood. In Holy Baptism, you are washed in the blood of Jesus Christ. But a martyr for Christ is literally washed in his own blood. Are James and John prepared to meet such a fate?

In ignorance, they say: "we are able." Jesus explains: "You will drink my cup. You will be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized." He's saying: "You will suffer for my sake, even to the point of death." James became the first of the apostles to die, martyred for the faith in Jerusalem in A.D. 44 or so. King Herod had him killed by the sword (Acts 12:2). John was the last apostle to die. He suffered for the faith, exiled to Patmos and persecuted by both Jew and Gentile. As the first and last apostles to enter glory, James and John, the sons of Zebedee serve as bookends for the other 10, all of whom suffered a martyr's death. Both James and John suffered for the faith. They had a little taste of that cup that Jesus drank in full. On their own they were not able, but the LORD gave them the strength to take up their cross and follow Christ, even to the point of death.

“But,” Jesus continues, “to sit at my right and and at my left is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared by my Father.” James and John and their mother are expecting a kingdom of this world, a kingdom of the left hand, where power can be exercised by the sword. They desire the prominence of those who sit in king’s courts, not yet realizing that the Kingdom of God is not of this world. It is up to the Father to distribute worldly authority, to raise up nations and empires and to cast them down (Dan 2:21). The Father appoints those who are to rule. And it is the Father who draws people to Jesus (John 6:44), into the Kingdom of the right hand. Jesus loves us and has freed us from our sins by His blood to make us a kingdom, priests to His God and Father (Rev 1:6). But it is not given to anyone to claim a position here for himself. Whatever happens will happen by the grace of God.

The rest of the disciples, of course, were upset when they heard the request of James and John. So Jesus uses this awkward situation to teach a lesson in humility. For James and John to ask for this position reveals a pride on their part which honest believers must admit often wells up inside of them as well. How sweet and glorious it is to be exalted in the eyes of others, to be looked up to and honored before all. Our sinful flesh wants power and recognition, but not the effort it takes or the risks associated with getting there. The Old Adam in us wants the prize without running the race, or at least without training for it. The Old Adam wants good grades without sleepless nights of study, or to lose weight while eating most anything and everything. The Old Adam in us is both lazy, desiring everything but wanting to suffer nothing to get there.

Jesus says: “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. It shall not be so among you.” True power in the Church is wielded by using the Word of God, not the wisdom of this world or political power. The Gentiles climb all over themselves and push others away to climb to the top, whether that’s in their

careers, their relationships, or in the personal goals they've set for themselves. But the life of a Christian ought to be different. The Christian life is not a life of being served but a life of service, of sacrificing our personal desires and wishes for the sake of others. Jesus says: "whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be your slave."

Jesus uses Himself as the primary example: "even as the Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many." The life of the Baptized reflects the life of the one into Whom you have been baptized, our Lord Jesus Christ. You are destined to drink from the same cup from which He drinks, and to be baptized in the same baptism of blood, to undergo suffering and to take up the cross He lays upon you and follow Him. As Jesus came to serve, so does He place you in positions of service, into whatever vocations you find yourself: as a son or daughter, mother or father, husband or wife, as a worker, a citizen, or as a member of this congregation. The Son of Man served us by laying down His life for us, and now we lay down our lives for others, including in little ways everyday. We sacrifice our own ambition and desire for the sake of our family, our nation, and our church. So often these sacrifices go unnoticed and unacknowledged before the world, but the point is not to receive recognition here. Our task is to serve in the place God has put us. The honor might only come in eternal life. But know that your Heavenly Father sees what you do in secret and He will reward you in eternity.

Dear Christians, this Lenten season, let us not grow weary of doing good, for in due season we will reap, if we do not give up (Gal 6:9). In the name of Jesus, Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen. We stand for the Magnificat.