

“Ransom Note” GPPC 10-21-18
Job 38:1-7, 34-41, Mark 10:35-45

When you were little, did you ever try this question with a parent? “Mom, Dad, I, I, I want you to do whatever I want, okay? Okay?” Ever try that one? Your parent probably said, “Well, that depends on what you want.”

So the disciples, James and John, come to Jesus with a request. (Mind you, they come to Jesus right after he has told them *for the third time* that *he* is going to be betrayed, mocked, spat upon, flogged, and killed.) Right after that they come and say, “Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you.”

They sound like clueless little kids, don’t they? And Jesus says, “What do you want?” And they say, “Well, we just want to sit, one on your right hand and the other on your left, when you come into your glory. That’s all. We just want to be the top disciples who get to sit beside you on your throne in glory.” This is not too much to ask, is it?

Except, it is.

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Jesus says, “You don’t know what you’re asking. Can you drink the cup that I drink or be baptized with the baptism I’m baptized with?” Drinking the cup and being baptized with the baptism Jesus receives is probably symbolic language for the suffering and crucifixion Jesus will endure.

And James and John say, “We’re able.” And Jesus says, “You will, but to sit on my right hand or left hand [right hand being the greatest honor and the left hand being the second greatest] but to sit on my right hand or left is not mine to grant; it’s an honor for those for whom it’s been prepared.”

We know from the Bible (Acts 12:2) that King Herod eventually has James “killed by the sword” which means he probably has his head chopped off. You know people who speak truth to ruthless power sometimes have that happen. Just ask the widow of Jamal Khashoggi. We know what happened to James, and we have a good idea what happened to Jamal Khashoggi. We don’t have any record of what happened to John, but it seems a tad unlikely he lived to a ripe old age and died in his sleep.

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Jesus tells James and John that they, as his disciples, can *count* on suffering and death. But they cannot count on or even effectively lobby for prestige or status. Don't you hate that this "following Jesus" thing puts such a cramp in our quest for stardom?

The other ten disciples catch wind of this whole episode and they begin to get angry at the two would-be throne-sitters. So Jesus calls all the disciples together for yet another talk about the ongoing problem of ego and status (which seems to come up in the gospels about every other week, doesn't it?).

Jesus lays out two very different ways of living as people on the earth. He says, "You know that among the Gentiles [Gentiles in this instance means basically unbelievers or people who are unaware of the God of Israel, the Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer, and the God of all people], you know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers *lord* it over them, and their great ones are *tyrants* over them."

Here is the way of living for people who are unbelievers or simply ill-informed. They recognize as leaders those who "lord over them." The

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Greek word means “to be master of” and “to subdue.” And their greatest leaders are “tyrants”. The Greek word is found only twice in the New Testament and it means to exercise authority not with someone but *over* someone. As one Bible scholar says it’s “likely that the word implies the tendency towards compulsion or oppression which is immanent in all earthly power...” (Werner Foerster in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, Vol. II, ed. Kittel and Friedrich, 575.)

The people of Jesus’ time certainly were acquainted with tyrants courtesy of the Roman Empire and its various Emperors and other tyrants. “Leadership” via the Empire meant that the population followed orders or faced torture and death. It wasn’t exactly subtle.

Those who study tyrants and would-be tyrants in more modern history say they often share common characteristics. They attack the press with censorship, or attacks on the press’s integrity and personhood, or finally with physical violence and jailing. Tyrants look for scapegoats to blame for their supporters’ problems. Tyrants do not simply engage in vigorous disagreement with their political opponents; they resort to demonizing, name-calling, and calls for their opponents to be

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imprisoned. Tyrants encourage or tolerate violence by their supporters, and they attempt to take away the civil rights of others in order to consolidate power for themselves. No one is above the law, except, of course, the tyrant. It all comes from an insatiable need for adulation and raw power. And ultimately it enslaves and destroys opponents, supporters, and even the tyrant. This is the way for those who do not truly know the God who made heaven and earth and the God who loves each of us as if we were an only child.

There is another way. Jesus says, “But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.”

Jesus flips the understanding of leadership and greatness upside down. Leadership and greatness are not about threat or force. They are not about tearing opponents down or trying to prevent truth from being known. They are not about ego and adulation. Leadership and greatness

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are about servanthood. And the greatest among us will be those who become humble servants (Jesus even uses the word “slave”) of all.

So when a child collects spare change for the hungry, this is more significant than a hit squad’s evil.

When a church member sits and listens to an elderly person for an hour or two, this matters more than a thousand, windy untruthful political pronouncements.

When we support Bread for the World and contact our elected representatives (public servants) and advocate for full funding to feed hungry children and adults in our country and around the world, this counts more than an arms deal.

When we spend time with kids who are a step away from homelessness. When we teach a Sunday school class. When we offer our gifts of art and music. When we speak the truth of God’s justice and mercy even when it is unpopular. When we gather for worship and recall that we are not God, *God* is God. When we offer our time, abilities, and money to God. *All* of these things, *all* of these things are meaningful and they have eternal value. They are kept in God’s safekeeping and they

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move the world, maybe just an inch, closer to the kingdom of God, the kingdom that God will finally usher in.

And how do we know this? Because Jesus himself, the Son of Man, “came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.” Jesus himself gave his very life as a ransom, a mysterious paying of debt that not only forgives and frees us from our sins and demonstrates God’s amazing love but also shows us the pattern for lives lived at their deepest and richest. Servant lives.

One of the great things about a servant life is that unlike the anxious and constant clawing for position and prestige that can be taken away in an instant, being a servant may change forms over the years, but nobody can stop us from being a servant. It’s one of God’s great gifts.

How are you and I serving these days? What might God be calling us to do to care for people who are in need? What new forms of service might God be equipping us to do?

Think and pray about that this week, and then see how you and I might respond and know the joy of servanthood.

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“Whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom...” Amen. ©Jeff Paschal