

Pastor's Message – 10/20/24  
Mark 10:35-45

The fingers on the hand were having a squabble about who was the greatest, who was the most significant finger of all, and each one put forth arguments to justify their claim of status.

The index finger said, "I'm the pointer, the one who summons others, the admonisher, the one raised to declare, 'We're number one!' I am obviously the most important finger on the hand." The middle finger said, "I'm the tallest and the strongest, the center of the hand, and obviously the most significant." The ring finger said, "I wear the symbols of marriage and loyalty, and as the most spiritual finger, I am certainly the most valuable." The pinky said, "Well, I am the smallest and the cutest, far more precious than the rest of you." And all the while the thumb – off to the side, stubby, fatter, unable to match the other fingers' claims – remained silent.

Unable to settle their argument, the fingers went to the Source of Wisdom, each hoping to be justified in their claims. But Wisdom said, "The greatest is the one who has no personal distinction, but who enables the entire hand to function well. The humble thumb is the greatest among you."

Our Bible reading today tells us about James' and John's request for seats of honor beside Jesus, when He is "in His glory." Just imagine how the rest of the disciples must have felt! In a part of the gospel passage we did not read today, it says they became angry with the James and John. Did those two think they were better than all the rest?

Jesus teaches the James and John and the rest of the disciples and us that service, not control, is the substance of leadership in God's kingdom. Suffering, not "success," is often its reward.

In one of the "God" movies, - you may remember George Burns in the Q God movies, and Morgan Freeman in Bruce Almighty and Evan Almighty - in Bruce Almighty, the character played by Jim Carrey complains, like many, that he could do a better job than God at caring for the earth and all its peoples. So, he is given the power and the responsibilities of God.

The Power of God.

What would you do with it if you had it? Would you keep it for yourself? Would you do everything you could to become even more powerful? Would you relish having power? Would you boss everyone around and enjoy a luxurious, pampered lifestyle? Would you have servants waiting on you hand and foot? Would you travel the world and stay in the most beautiful and expensive places? Would you buy a mansion and seven fancy cars – one for each day of the week? Would you be a benevolent dictator, but a dictator, nonetheless?

Or would you use your power to make others more powerful? Would you be willing to relinquish some power in order to help the powerless?

What makes a person powerful in our world today?

I read a story about Dan Price, the thirty-something CEO of a credit card payment-processing firm that he founded in Seattle named Gravity Payments. Mr. Price, who as the company's founder and CEO draws an annual salary of nearly \$1 million, announced that he was voluntarily reducing his salary to \$70,000 a year in order to raise the minimum salary of every employee at Gravity to \$70,000.

Mr. Price had read an article about researchers from Princeton who had discovered that in the United States, there is a direct correlation between annual income and overall well-being in life. The research showed that for people to be happy—meaning enjoying a life without too much stress, where the balance tips in favor of joy and affection over anger and sadness—their annual income, at that time, they felt needed to be at least \$75,000.

When Mr. Price read that article, he realized that he had the power to substantially change the lives of his 120 employees. And so, he made the decision to lower his own annual income in order to raise the incomes of others.

Power.

Power is what the disciples were after. But what is power? What represented power to the disciples? What represents power to you? Does having money make a person powerful? In the story about Mr. Price, the purpose of increasing the annual salaries of his employees was to improve their well-being, to make their lives happier. Is being happy and enjoying a sense of well-being a form of power? Ask someone who struggles to pay the rent and put food on the table if he or she has any power.

Power.

Does having a certain status or job make a person powerful? Do titles, levels of education, or positions of authority give people power? Do these accomplishments entitle some people to do things that others can't? Do these things give them responsibilities that others do not hold?

In the church people sometimes think that the pastor has more power than the lay people. We think that because he or she has that degree, or that title, or that salary, that the pastor is the one who is called to share the gospel with others, or lead people in prayer, or invite people to church.

Power.

Do pastors have special power when they pray? Do they have more power because they are ordained or licensed or degreed or appointed? Do they have more power than laity? Is it acceptable for the pastor to ask someone else to pray? Is it reasonable for a congregation to assume that if someone is a pastor, he or she has gifts for leading prayer? What would happen if the people in the congregation who are most gifted for leading prayer stepped forward to offer that power for the benefit of the congregation? What would happen if that gifted person were to offer to pray in worship and in meetings, and to lead a class on leading in public prayer, or even volunteer to help the pastor improve his or her skills?

Power.

When James and John asked Jesus to give them power, to give them a double-share like Elijah did for Elisha (see 2 Kings 2:9) and pass on that mantle and name them as his successors in leading the movement, what did Jesus say?

He said, “You don’t know what you are asking. You aren’t ready. If you are asking for power, then you are the last ones who should have it. You are not prepared at all to do what I’m about to do. Power is not mine to have, and it is not mine to bestow. Any power I have is meant to be given away, in order to lift up those who have no power.”

Power.

Jesus says if you have it, you must give it away in order to help the powerless. The first must become last. The great must become servants of all. Power is only worth something if it helps to empower another.

Power.

Maybe the greatest power we can have is when no one lords it over the others, when we offer ministry together, each giving out of his or her unique set of gifts. By the power of the Holy Spirit, every person has been clothed with gifts from on high. Our power as congregations comes not from the strong leadership of one, but from the strong leadership of many. It is tempting, when we have some power, to want to use it mostly to feel good about *ourselves*. But the message of Jesus is that when we have power, the best thing we can do is use it to help *others* feel good about *themselves*.

This, says Jesus, is the greatest power we can ever hope to have, for the Jesus didn’t come to be served, but to serve and to give his life to liberate many people. This, says Jesus, is true power.

We still find Jesus’ idea of servanthood difficult to grasp, despite the advantage of having 2000 years of hindsight. But if we reflect on Jesus’ actions, on how He went about reversing the generally accepted order of things, turning the world upside down and inside out, we gain a better understanding of what He meant.

Think about those whom Jesus chose as disciples. They were not from the elite group of Jewish religious leaders; they were common, everyday people – fishermen and the like. We also remember the stories of Jesus eating with tax collectors and sinners. Jesus was often in the company of outcasts, those living on the fringes of society – the sick, the homeless, those rejected by others.

He even talked with women and foreigners and encouraged young children to visit him. Jesus made no distinction among people – all were treated equally. No one was better than anyone else. Jesus treated all He met with respect, love, and compassion.

We sometimes have difficulties following Jesus in those ways. We, whether consciously or unconsciously, judge others and that freezes us from living out Jesus’ call. You all know that I follow baseball and, since the Brewers were

eliminated from the post-season long ago, I haven't been watching any of the games. I have to confess that the big market teams like the Yankees and the Dodgers kind of turn me off. Having enough money to buy any players they want rubs me the rub way. Maybe it shouldn't, but it does.

Prejudices and pre-conceived notions can freeze us from having the same attitude that is in Jesus. Whatever it is, if the gospel is anything, it is about being freed from the things that freeze us. It is about being set free! It is about being released to a new life!

Once upon a time, I had a Lay Speaker preach and lead worship on a Sunday one year when I was gone and I still remember the orangutan he had on the bulletin cover asking "What to do? What to do?"

What can we do to prevent our spiritual lives from freezing up? Here are some suggestions:

- *Stay in God's word.* The psalmist wrote: "How can young people, how can anyone, keep their way pure? By guarding it according to your word" (Ps. 119:9). In that same psalm we read, "Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path" (v. 105).

- *Prayer.* When worry and anxiety tie us up in knots, we're instructed to pray: "Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus" (Philippians 4:6-7). Notice the "guarding" function of the peace of Christ! It's a military image, but it can easily be translated to a computer metaphor. The peace of Jesus Christ guards us, protects us from the viruses and malware and security breaches that threaten us.

- *Community.* We find strength in numbers! It's no accident that those who are in AA go to weekly meetings. It is a key to their sobriety. Likewise, the Bible reminds us "to provoke one another to love and good deeds, *not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some*, but encouraging one another" (Hebrews 10:24-25, emphasis added).

Power is in service; power is in God's word, in prayer and in the church community. It is in putting the needs of others first, recognizing our blessings that we might be a blessing to others. It is not in lifting ourselves or expecting reward or recognition, but in giving all that away, giving without expecting reward or thanks or recognition. The world tells put yourself first, demand your rights, ask "what's in it for me," look out for numero uno.

Jesus turns things upside down and inside out. The first shall be last and the last shall be first. It is a hard message to hear and a hard message to put into practice much less to make an integral part of our personality. Are ye able? We are, but only by the grace of God.