

Year B Proper 29 Free...Now What Do We Do...Mark 10:35-45

James and John don't seem to have been listening to Jesus' teachings. If they have been listening, they sure aren't understanding them. Jesus has been telling them that power in God's kingdom is the opposite of power in the world's way of thinking. Greatness in God's kingdom is the opposite of greatness in the world's way of thinking. Jesus and the disciples have just watched a very wealthy young man walk away from them instead of joining them because, although he followed all of the laws, he couldn't bear to be parted with his possessions. He valued his wealth, relied on his wealth, above God. And Jesus has just finished telling his disciples, in gruesome detail, that he will be killed by the religious authorities who value their power and status and possessions above God because he, Jesus, is a threat to that way of thinking and being in the world.

These teachings haven't gotten through to the disciples. James and John have realized that Jesus is a figure of authority, Jesus is going to be very powerful one day soon and they want in on the action. They want to be up there reveling in power with him, ruling with him. But James and John simply can't let go of the world's idea of power – power as position, property, and pocketbook – and they sure haven't clued in to the way in which Jesus is going to reach this pinnacle of power, sitting at God's right hand.

Jesus confronts their thick-headedness by reminding them of the path to power that lies before him – the “cup” he must drink, the “baptism” he must undergo. He is telling them, again, that violence and death await him in Jerusalem. That is the nature of his kingship – he will die as a despised and rejected “king” because of who he is and what he lives. Jesus has been living and proclaiming the division-

defying reality of life in God's kingdom where all are equal, all share in God's bounty. And those who wield power in the world will do all that they can to protect themselves and their agenda from this upside-down kingdom of God kind of thinking and living.

James and John say that they are willing to share in that same cup and that same baptism. Jesus knows better but keeps quiet about that for now. Jesus, instead, focuses here on their worldly idea of power and prestige. These worldly ideas are clearly shared by the rest of the disciples because they are fuming at James and John who have tried to manoeuvre their way into power alongside of Jesus ahead of them.

Jesus calls them all over to him to explain yet again. The Gentiles, he says, those who do not know God and God's ways, the Gentiles who have power hold it over the heads of their people, using their power to their advantage, acting like tyrants. This is the type of power that will soon crush the life out of him in Jerusalem. This is the type of power in total opposition to the power he will display during his trial, during his execution, and in his resurrection.

Jesus then squarely points his finger at his disciples and says, "but that is not the way you operate." Those who hold power in the way that the world sees power rely on coercion, manipulation, and backroom negotiations to maintain their dominance, evening phone calls to make sure the decision goes their way at Sunday's church meeting. Mark has already shown us that John the Baptist died at the hands of those holding worldly power – it was their self-interest and self-protection that had John killed and Jesus will soon experience the same thing. Jesus says to his disciples they must not think that way, they must not act that

way. In stark contrast to worldly power, Jesus and his disciples measure power and greatness according to the ability to live as servants even when it means suffering at the hands of those wielding the worldly power.

The final line we hear Jesus speak today tells us that in his death, Jesus exemplified this way of living. “For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve,” he says, “And to give his life as a ransom for many.” His death shows us the violence and resistance that his teaching provokes in those who hold power over society. His death shows us his complete rejection of power and privilege as the world sees those things.

But Jesus’ death does more than just show us his ultimate act of serving. His death does more than just show us his love in the face of the world’s violent attempt to hold onto their power. His death is “more than simply an inspiring example of a martyr’s tragic protest against an unjust system” (Matt Skinner, Working Preacher). Jesus tells us that his death is a ransom for many. We have some modern use baggage attached to the word “ransom” that gets in the way of our understanding of these words spoken by Jesus. We define ransom as a payment to the bad person in order to ensure the safe release of one or more hostages. We think money and we think payment when we hear the word “ransom.” This thinking, though, turns Jesus’ death into a transaction, a payment made to satisfy the penalties for bad behaviour that we have accumulated and worse still, a payment made to God to appease his wrath, to satisfy the need for divine justice.

However, the Greek word *lytron* – translated as ransom – simply means “release.” Notice that Jesus tells us he is our ransom *within* his teaching about power and

servitude. This passage contains nothing about the problem of sin and the need to secure forgiveness. Notice that the passage does not say Jesus will *pay* a ransom, it simply says he *is* the ransom – the release – for his people.

If we turn to the Old Testament, as Jesus would have done, in order to better understand what Jesus means when he tells us he is our ransom, we see that when *people* talk about ransoming others or redeeming others, it sometimes is a purchased freedom. But, when *God* talks about ransoming his people, it refers to God's acting to deliver his people – a liberation accomplished by divine strength, not by payment. For example, during the Exodus, God says to his people through Moses, "I will bring you out from under the yoke of the Egyptians. I will free you from being slaves to them, and I will ransom you with an outstretched arm and with mighty acts of judgment" (Ex.6:6). Jesus therefore declares in our Gospel story today "(without stopping to clarify precisely how) that God, through Jesus' death, will free people from oppression and captivity to [worldly] power, restoring them to membership in the community [of] God's reign" (Matt Skinner, Working Preacher).

Through his death, Jesus has released us from the bonds of the social and political power that humans create to control each other. We are free. What do we do with that freedom? We are free to let go of the ways of the world. We are free to be children of God, free to follow God's ways, to follow Jesus. Following Jesus, the servant Messiah, means being a servant – and not just a servant, we must be "slaves of all," Jesus tells us. Servants have a little bit of status. Slaves have none – no honour, no status, no greatness, no power. It seems like a backwards way of thinking of freedom as becoming slaves. Jesus' point is that slaves possess

nothing of the world that causes inequality, oppression, greed...We must let go of worldly power and greatness in order to rid the world of all the brokenness that those things create. We let go of those things as Jesus did in order to live in God's kingdom as Jesus did.

Martin Luther King Jr. famously described the freedom to live into such perfection:

"I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood.. ...I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the colour of their skin but by the content of their character; I have a dream that one day every valley shall be exalted, every hill and mountain shall be made low, the rough places will be made plain and the crooked places will be made straight and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed and all flesh shall see it together.... When we let freedom ring when we let it ring from every village and every hamlet, from every state and every city, we will be able to speed up that day when all of Gods children, black men and white men., black sisters and white sisters, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics will be able to join hands and sing in the words of the old Negro spiritual, Free at last! Free at last.! Thank God almighty we are free at last."

What is striking is that Dr. King notes that we will be able to speed up the day when perfection arrives. Working with God, and with the freedom God granted us, we have the power to hasten the kingdom. As slaves, unburdened from the shackles of worldly power, what does hastening the kingdom look like here in this community?

“For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve,” Jesus says, “And to give his life as a ransom for many.” Jesus has released us. “Free at last! Free at last! Thank God almighty we are free at last. Let us wisely live the life of God’s freedom and let *us* hasten the kingdom.