

In today's gospel, James and John make a curious request. They ask Jesus to seat them at his right and his left, in his glory. These two disciples, who are brothers, want significant roles in Jesus's coming kingdom. It's not surprising that they seek such roles, roles with significant power, roles represented by their desire to be seated next to Jesus. After all, in human circles, whether in government or commerce, education or entertainment, leadership is most commonly understood in terms of power and control and honor, isn't it? The king is the most powerful person in his kingdom, the CEO the most powerful at her company, the university president among her faculty, the movie director on his set. It's natural for James and John, who consider themselves to be Jesus's best friends, to seek to partake in his power.

But the brothers' request for power is incredibly awkward in its timing. Did you notice what precedes their request? Jesus has just told his disciples, for the third time, that he will be condemned to death and mocked and killed, and then be raised from death. When Jesus talks about his death, these two disciples aren't listening at all; instead, they express interest in the seats at Jesus's right and left in his glory.

This actually happens three times in Mark's gospel, that Jesus tells the disciples he will suffer and die and be raised--and none of them listen. Three times, they don't get what Jesus says at all. The first time Jesus speaks of his suffering and death, Peter rebukes him. The second time, the disciples argue about which of them is the greatest. And this third time, in today's gospel reading? James and John ask Jesus to reserve their thrones. While Jesus is talking about suffering and death, the disciples ignore him; they're too busy thinking about power and control and honor.

In responding to James's and John's ill-timed request, Jesus criticizes the power-hungry model that allows a leader to care only about himself. He rejects the prevailing model of leadership of his day. He identifies this as leadership "among the Gentiles"; it's leadership in which "rulers lord it over others" and "the great are tyrants". In contrast, Jesus offers the disciples a different model of leadership. "Among you," he says, "the one who wants to be great must be a servant. The one who wants to be first must be a slave. The leader is one who comes, not to be served, but to serve."

This is a radical departure from the leadership that Jesus's disciples have seen. They are accustomed to leadership as abusive power... the Roman soldier demanding that a bystander carry his pack; the tax collector collecting more than is due so he can pocket the extra cash; the rabbi insisting on being first in line at the congregational potluck--or the wedding banquet--or the Passover feast. In stark contrast to these images, Jesus says, "If you want to be great, you must be a servant. If you want to be first, you must be a slave." Jesus chooses a model of leadership evidenced not in power and control and honor, but, rather, in vulnerability, in compassion, in service.

Something tells me that James and John don't immediately drop their quest for power and control and honor after Jesus chastises them. Like the Gentiles, they see leadership as a way to exercise power over others, to "lord it over" others, as Jesus puts it, to act as tyrants. They don't buy in to Jesus's counter-cultural model of leadership as vulnerability, compassion, and service. Instead, I suspect that, even after Jesus chastises them, they continue to seek power and control and honor.

Because I'd like to have power and control and honor, too. I'd like some power when a patient is coding or a cancer has metastasized. I'd like some control when someone who is addicted wants to get clean, or, come to think of it, when I'm stuck in traffic. I'd like some honor when a colleague

disrespects me, or when I'm trying to get a lawyer to speak to me in plain English. Like James and John, I'd like a throne next to Jesus, especially when I'm on the phone with an insurance company--or trying to get a refund on an Amazon purchase. Maybe you'd like that, too. James and John seek thrones next to Jesus, so they can have power and control and honor. We do, too. We like sitting on thrones, because, there, we can feel important--and superior to everyone else.

There's a lot of throne-seeking going on in our nation these days. Among the Neo-Nazis on the right, for example, and the "Antifa" on the left. Antifa is a movement that espouses direct action against fascism. These extreme militant groups, at opposite ends of the spectrum, harass people on the other side, so they can feel important. Or... among public figures like Harvey Weinstein and Matt Lauer and James Levine and Bill Cosby, whose positions of enormous power allowed them to abuse those below them on the power ladder, so they could feel important, until those they had abused or assaulted or raped took their own power and spoke up. But we seek thrones, too, because we want to feel important. We seek power and control and honor.

Lord John Acton, who was born in Britain in 1834, was painfully aware of the damaging dynamics of power. In 1870, he argued against the doctrine of papal infallibility that was eventually adopted at the First Vatican Council. Acton wrote, "I cannot accept ... that we are to judge Pope and King unlike other men, with a favorable presumption that they [can do] no wrong. If there is any presumption, it is the other way, [that] the holders of power [increase in wrong] as [their] power increases..." And then he wrote this famous sentence which has been applied far beyond arguments over papal infallibility: "Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely. Great men are almost always bad men, [because the more power they have, the more likely they are to be corrupted]. "Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely."

Jesus, of course, knew this truth long before Lord Acton, long before the Neo-Nazis and Antifa groups, long before the "Me, too!" movement. He offered his disciples a model of leadership marked not by power and control and honor, but by vulnerability and compassion and service. Not tempted by importance, Jesus doesn't assign thrones on his right and his left. In fact, he doesn't have a throne with seats on the right and left to dispense, because he is too busy serving. He models servant leadership, leadership which is willing to get in there and get dirty, picking up garbage on Hwy 32, for example, or caring for a vomiting child or visiting a neighbor who has AIDS or sorting non-perishables at the Food Bank or collecting cans for Thanksgiving baskets--or sitting at the Church Council table when you can think of many more fun things to do on a Wednesday evening. (Shameless plug here: we need four candidates for Council positions in 2019.) Jesus offers his disciples an example of such servant leadership in both word and in deed. He talks it, and then he walks it; he puts servant leadership into practice, daily as he forgives and teaches and heals, and then finally and ultimately on the cross, when he gives up his power, his control, his honor, for the sake of us sinners, to give his life so that you and I might have life. That's servant leadership: vulnerability and compassion and service poured out for the sake of others, power and control and honor willingly given over so that others might live.

In the Hebrew Bible, this servant leadership might be personified in the role of the *goel* in ancient Israel. Spelled "g-o-e-l" and commonly translated "Redeemer", a *goel* was the next of kin to someone in need of help, who was expected to take responsibility for that person. *Goel* comes from a verb translated "deliver, defend, or redeem". Your *goel*, your Redeemer or Defender or Deliverer, would go with you to restore your rights in a dispute with a neighbor or to defend you in court; he

would redeem your land, if you had sold it in order to feed your family; he would deliver you from slavery, if you had sold yourself to pay off your debts. The *goel* was a servant leader; rather than considering his own interests, he acted on behalf of someone else. The goal of the *goel* was, in Jesus's words, not to be served, but to serve; in fact, Jesus himself is the *goel* for all who are in need of help, who are in any trouble, who are in need of defense or deliverance or redemption.

As a *goel*, Jesus is a leader who practices vulnerability and compassion and service. He doesn't just tell his disciples to live as servants; he lives that sort of leadership himself. Joseph Sittler, a Lutheran pastor and theologian of the last century, labels Jesus' leadership as "authority" and leadership "among the Gentiles" as "power". Sittler explains, "Richard Nixon had the power of the presidency up to the moment he resigned, [but he] had no authority following... Watergate, [while] Abraham Lincoln... had authority, [so he] didn't have to use sheer power. [Whereas] Pope Pius XII... used the full power of the papacy, and [his pronouncements were] obediently [followed but] not inwardly honored, Pope John XXIII never used the outer power of the papacy, but he had enormous authority."

Jesus, too, had authority, and he chose not to abuse power. He told his disciples, "The rulers of the Gentiles exercise power over you, but among you, whoever wishes to become great must be your servant." For Jesus, leadership is not about power, but about authority. Sittler explains the difference... "My grandmother had authority; my grandfather had power. I remember what my grandmother said, and I have no remembrance of anything my grandfather said except that I had to do it. But I wanted to do what my grandmother said." Listen to Sittler again, "My grandmother had authority; my grandfather had power. I remember what my grandmother said, and I have no remembrance of anything my grandfather said except that I had to do it. But I wanted to do what my grandmother said."

Like Sittler's grandmother, Jesus is a servant leader; he rules not by power, but with authority. Like a *goel*, he's not concerned with his power or his control or his honor, but with your good. He doesn't abuse power; he doesn't force you to do anything or expect you to do his bidding blindly. Instead, he comes to you in vulnerability, in compassion, in service. He stands by your side, defending and delivering and redeeming. Exercising his authority, he invites you to follow him. And when you do, you don't have to feign importance or pretend greatness or seek significance or ask for a throne, because God has already given you status in God's reign. You are already important in God's eyes; you are already great in God's heart, you are already significant, just as you are, just as God made you.

You don't need a throne on Jesus's right or his left, beloved, because he is already next to you, already standing at your right and at your left. He keeps watch before you and behind. He is above you and below you. He is with you. He is your *goel*, and he stands beside you, at your right and at your left, in vulnerability, in compassion, in service, ready to defend, to deliver, to redeem. Ready to pour himself out for you, to serve you so that you can serve others, for Jesus' sake.

Please join me in praying, with St. Patrick:

May Christ shield me today.

Christ with me, Christ before me, Christ behind me; Christ in me, Christ beneath me, Christ above me; Christ on my right, Christ on my left. AMEN