

I Call Front Seat!

By: Meagan McLaughlin

October 20, 2024. In today's gospel reading, James and John ask to sit at the right hand and left hand of Jesus in the glory to come. Pastor Meagan preaches on this text, and on how in the kingdom of God there are plenty of seats, and no need to fight for a place.

Readings: [Hebrews 5:1-10](#), [Mark 10:32-45](#)

*** Transcript ***

As we listen to this week's gospel, with James and John asking to be assigned to the best seats in the glory to come, I can't help but go back to being the oldest sister with two younger brothers heading out to the car. Inevitably one of them would call it out. "I call front seat!" Anyone else heard that phrase, or something similar? I don't know if this way of claiming the front passenger seat was a Minnesota thing, or a '70s thing, or a McLaughlin thing, but I can tell you I rarely got the front seat unless my parents intervened. And if the whole family was in the car together, my spot as the oldest-but-shortest of the kids was in the middle of the back seat, with my feet rested on the "hump" and my brothers could take turns squishing me from either side as we went around the corners. Believe me, my position in the car was most often less about humbly taking the "last place" than it was about losing out on the best place.

We hear this story today and we might imagine people, James and John among them perhaps, edging their way into chairs at the table — perhaps on this day when we get to celebrate communion with Katie we can imagine that it's the communion table — everyone pushing, sometimes politely, sometimes kind of rudely, to get the best seat at the table, closest to their favorite food or their favorite person.

And for weeks, Jesus has been trying to help the disciples understand what's really coming — and it is a far cry from the image of honor that James and John are craving. Jesus tells them again in the first few verses of our gospel today that struggle, persecution, rejection, and death is in store for Jesus and his followers, before the liberation that they are longing for. And as so often happens in Mark's gospel, the disciples just don't get it. James and John are picturing glory and thrones and recognition, at Jesus' right and Jesus' left hand. What's actually coming is the cross, one at his right, one at his left, hung not in glory but in death.

It's no wonder the disciples don't understand this. They probably don't want to understand. I know that often I don't. They left families, friends, livelihood, everything to follow Jesus these last few years. And now Jesus is talking not about overthrowing Roman occupation, but of being arrested, tortured, and murdered by the state. I imagine they're all wondering what is coming next, and what things will look like when it's finally all over.

It's not surprising that James and John got stuck in their ego, envisioning a way that this could turn out well for them. With things seemingly falling apart and not together, James and John just want to have some sense that they are on the right path, and haven't wasted their time, all these years. And yes, maybe they just want a little recognition for everything they've given up, to follow this man from Nazareth, who now seems to be showing signs of being maybe a bit lost. Where is that going to leave them, if they can't establish their place?

People of Christ, it seems in so many ways that we are at such a time and place. There is a lot of falling apart happening around us, isn't there? No matter what your political, economic, and social

views, we're facing an election that has so much at stake — and just like James and John, so much striving for place and power.

I call the front seat! We want to sit at your right and left side, Jesus. I and my group are deserving of a place, and you — they — are not. “We” know better than “they” what they need. “They” are not quite as human as “we” are. “They” are criminals, traitors, insane, rapists, doing things we consider unspeakable. It doesn't matter if I lie, as long as I get what I need. So many lies. On everything. Promises or threats that violence and disenfranchisement of peoples is a valid means to an end. And that end is winning, power that cannot be questioned without the full weight of law and political and military might being waged against you. A power that feeds ego. I call the front seat.

At the Synod's Theological Conference this week, we talked about navigating difference, we talked about the truth and call of the gospel, we talked about how we as Christians are called to engage in this beautiful, messy, broken, and sometimes even scary world we live in. We named the drive to get the first seat or the most power, the validation of violence as valid, and the desire to draw the hardest line we can between us and them as heresies, things that distort the gospel we are called to share. We named our own sin.

You notice that Jesus didn't kick James and John or the rest of the disciples out when they wrestled with these things, but he called them in, together. He spoke hard truth, clearly and directly. He said rulers are tyrants over them, but it is not so among you; instead, whoever wishes to become great among you must become your servant. Jesus told the truth of what was happening in the world, and showed them a different way. We navigate complex things, name the gospel and heresy and disagreement, and at the end of the day we all come to the table. In Hebrews, we hear that Jesus himself did not seize power, but is given power, by the one who called him by name. And with that power, Jesus models being a servant, one who doesn't avoid truth or fight for authority, but claims space for all as beloved children of God, and stands clearly against the heresies that distort our gospel.

James and John were certainly caught up in their ego. It is such a human thing, isn't it? Jesus, one more time, reminds them: it's not about being first or last, or on the left or the right, or in the front seat of the car or in the middle with feet on the hump. At God's table, all the seats have the best food, the best people, the best view.

Katie, today we joyfully welcome you to that table. At the communion table, all are welcome, and there is enough for everyone. In the kin-dom of God there are plenty of seats, and no need to fight for a place to sit.

As the Spirit moves on, today's readings invite us to continue to seek the will of God, not in security and honor as our egos so easily lean into, but in the ways we can uniquely serve, giving of ourselves to God and the world. Katie, as we reminded each other in Communion class this week, we are called with God's help to act, to live in such a way that we seek God's truth and good for all of creation. The call to follow Jesus is, as it always has been, about going where the Spirit leads, embodying the love of God in the world, and serving those around us, trusting that wherever we go, we will not go alone.

Thanks be to God.

*** Keywords ***

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