

The Twenty-first Sunday after Pentecost, Year B, Proper 24
The Reverend D.S. Mote, PhD
St Paul's Episcopal Church, Key West, FL
October 17, 2021
Isaiah 53:4-12
Psalm 91:9-16
Hebrews 5:1-10
Mark 10:35-45

Rocky and the Hotheads with Special Guest Star Melchizedek, or Servant Leadership on the Rock

If you had just told your closest circle of friends that some horrific things were going to happen to you, that you were going to die soon, and that none of it could be avoided, how would you feel if two of them immediately began to talk about what they'd like to receive after it's all over and you are dead and gone?

That's pretty much the circumstance in which we find Jesus in our gospel today.

In the three verses between where our gospel passage for last week ended and where today's begins, Jesus has just taken the twelve core male disciples aside to tell them, for the third time in Mark's gospel, that they are going to Jerusalem; that he is going to be arrested and handed over to the religious authorities who will condemn him to death; and that those people are then going to hand him over to the Roman authorities who are going to mock him and spit on him and flog him and kill him. And, he tells them, also for the third time, that after he has been killed, he will rise again after three days.

It's a heavy message, for sure. I'm not sure I would have been able to take it in even on the third go 'round.

It's the kind of information that makes your brain shut down, to hear that your most important person is soon to die. That bit about rising again at the end seems so crazy it probably wouldn't counteract all the parts about all the traumas leading up to it.

Human beings respond in many different ways to bad or difficult news.

In the case of James and John, the Zebedee boys, their response to this information the third time around is to step right up and tell Jesus what they'd like to receive after all those things go down.

That's some *chutzpah* right there, would you agree? What would prompt such a request?

Let's recall again that the gospel of Mark was composed by and for a community of Jewish Jesus followers who had been forced out of the synagogues and who were being persecuted by the Roman authorities—a community whose principal, driving question was, "How do we

move *through* suffering?” With that in mind, perhaps we can understand this response a little more.

How do *we* move through suffering? Do we try to identify something to look forward to on the other side of it? Do we bargain with the Almighty about it, trying to make deals like: “God, if you’ll get me through this, I promise I will...[you fill in the blank]?”

The Zebedee boys, James and John, put their own twist on this bargaining. They promise they’ll do everything in exchange for something they want. They are audacious in their ask. *Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask.*

Jesus replies, as he often does to petitioners, “What do you want me to do for you?” *What do you want?*

“Let us sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory,” they say.

“You don’t know what you’re asking,” Jesus replies, and he begins to put some questions to them.

They talk big. *Yes, Jesus. We are able. We will endure everything with you. We are all in. And, after it is all said and done, we’d like, in return, for you to let us sit beside you, one on your right and one on your left, when at last you reign supreme.*

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Jesus called this pair of fishing brothers, James and John, the sons of Zebedee, on the shore of the Sea of Galilee, right after he called another pair of fishing brothers, Simon and Andrew.

The nickname Jesus gave the Zebedee boys was *Boanerges* [Bo-NER-jeez]: “sons of thunder.” They might have also been loud and rowdy, but the main reason they earned this moniker from their teacher was because of their fiery tempers. They were prone to be judgmental of others and to fly off the handle pretty easily. These two hotheads and Simon, whom Jesus called “Peter,” meaning “Rock,” are the only disciples who received nicknames from Jesus, at least so far as it’s recorded in the gospels. They could have been a band: say, Rocky and the Hotheads, or something like that.

Meanwhile, back on the road to Jerusalem from Perea, word of James’ and John’s audacious request reaches the other ten core male disciples. And it hacks them off, including Peter. And Jesus, ever the teacher, transforms a context of anger and conflict into a teachable moment. He introduces a concept that we now call “servant leadership.”

He says, *Y’all know how the Romans and the other Gentiles act, how they use power to intimidate and dominate. That’s not what my movement is about.*

It's a new model that Jesus introduces. It's about power to and power for and power with rather than power over. It was a radically different approach to power and leadership in the first century. And, let's be very honest, it remains a countercultural approach to power and leadership to this day, perhaps especially in our culture in our historical moment.

The person who wishes to be great, to have what matters most, including the respect and affection of their community, must serve, not seek to be served.

The person who wishes to make a positive impact that will resonate beyond themselves must figure out how the greater good can be served by what they do and how they do it. They must discern their purpose and mission and be willing to defer some of the things they might personally prefer so that their community can more closely resemble the kind of right-side-up because turned-upside-down approach and order that Jesus teaches and models.

And this same approach obtains for entire communities as well. Communities must discern their role in servant leadership. What are the ways the greater good of Key West and the Lower Keys can be served by the congregation of St Paul's? What are the invitations that are emerging? How does the community wish to be served by us? To use Jesus' question: *What do they want?*

The ways we have served previously, not just St Paul's but the Episcopal Church generally speaking and the Church, capital "C," have functioned out of something known as the attractional model: a campus-centered model where the goal was usually to get more people to *come* to the church campus. Too often in recent decades our position has been, "This is what we do. This is where we do it. This is how we do it. This is when we do it. Y'all know where we are. Take it or leave it."

In living out the model of servant leadership in our context in this moment in the 21st century, St Paul's and the entire Episcopal Church and the entire Church, capital "C," are being called to adopt a missional model, to *go* from our place into the community. This place, this sacred space, is our communal power center, our shared holy filling station. We come here in person or virtually to be recharged, and we go from here into the world to be Christ's hands and feet and to receive all those we encounter as Christ, seeking to serve rather than be served.

St Paul's has a long history of offering various kinds of hospitality at the corner of Duval and Eaton Streets. Other congregations, including St John's and B'nai Zion Synagogue, have met here when they were without places to meet. Gifts from those congregations adorn this nave. This Madonna and Child here in the Lady Chapel, on your right, was a gift from the community of St John's, Cuban émigrés who worshipped here as St John's for many years, beginning in the late nineteenth century. And on your left, in this case, is a menorah which is

a gift from the congregation of B'nai Zion in thanks for the use of this space after their synagogue burned and before they built a new one.

For over a decade now, St Paul's has kept this space, that we call the nave, open in daylight hours seven days a week. That hospitality now continues in a both-and mode: welcoming those who come into this space physically *and* who join online, including for Morning and Evening Prayer led by Bruce and Samantha and Mary and Lisa and Tim, on occasion. People who come here, people who meet virtually *and* going forth to connect with those who need our service and who may never come here.

The mission of the Church, capital "C," and of the Episcopal Church, and of St Paul's remains the same. Do you know what it is? It's near the top of page 855 in the Book of Common Prayer, in the section we know as the catechism, or an outline of the faith. You can pull out a prayer book and check me on it if you want. "The mission of the Church is to restore all people to unity with God and each other in Christ." It's an awesome mission. I am so glad to be invited to be part of it in the company of Jesus and all of you.

The mission remains the same. And, we must not only refocus on our mission but also adapt our approaches and our methods. Our strategies and our tactics must address the needs of a culture and the realities of life on these islands. These have changed hugely since St Paul's began in 1832.

The mission is the same. The only way we will lose relevance is if we fail to update the modes of living out the mission to address our current context. Christ will come again; the 1950s will not. Discerning what methods and models to employ is part of our collective work of servant leadership.

We know part of our work is the ongoing restoring of these buildings where everyone is welcome. And we know that we are called to the restoring of relationships in the community. We are moving deliberately and refusing to hurry in our discernment, not because we don't want to do the work but because we want to take on the right work for us in this season.

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Today's readings include a portion of a passage from Isaiah known as the Fourth Song of the Suffering Servant. Many times, through the centuries, Christians have turned this song into an individualized one about Jesus. The deeper context, however, reveals that for centuries before Jesus and all the centuries after him, the Jewish people by and large have understood "the servant" to refer collectively to them as a people. And a review of only the history of the twentieth century much less all the preceding ones reveals the horrific scale of the suffering the Jewish people have endured.

We often associate serving with suffering. And sometimes it is the case that they go hand in hand. Yet, more often, when we are serving in alignment with our personal gifts, we find

much more joy than suffering comes our way. That doesn't mean things won't be challenging or difficult; it does mean that they will be worth it. Generally, suffering that is of our own making comes from misalignment of our gifts with our work. Also from overextension—taking on too much—or lack of healthy boundaries—taking on others' work or getting territorial about work that others can do and want to do also.

When there is alignment between our gifts, our purpose, and our serving, we experience a sense of rightness, of attunement, like when Jesus says, “My yoke is easy, my burden is light”: it's 'cause you're wearing the right one. It feels right, and we feel like ourselves. We may also feel a bit vulnerable because we are putting ourselves out there, but we are willing to take the risk.

In those situations, we are truly following Jesus and emulating his example of servant leadership. And when that happens it will mean that we will at least somewhat resemble him in what our second reading today describes as “a priest forever after the order of Melchizedek.” What does that mean?

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This takes us all the way back to Genesis, y'all, all the way back to the beginning of what will become our tradition. Melchizedek is a priest-king. He is the first person identified in scripture as a priest of God Most High, the God whom Abraham also worships.

Melchizedek is priest of and king of a city in Hebrew scripture first referred to as Shalem (or Salem). It will later come to be called Jerusalem. Jeru-shalom: place of peace. As a literal city, today as many times throughout its very long history, Jerusalem is not a place of peace. As a concept, as a metaphor for our life and growth, it remains significant. What makes a place of welcome and peace?

Melchizedek goes out to meet Abraham and 300-and-something people traveling with him. He goes out to meet them with bread and wine. He goes out to meet them and offers a feast and a blessing in the name of God Most High. He goes out to meet them after a long, hard journey and an intense battle. Hospitality, blessing, and service with a pure heart to complete strangers in the name of and on behalf of God Most High. Servant leadership *a la* Melchizedek.

Who are the people in our city, our community, our place who need us to bring them a feast and a blessing? Long, hard journeys and intense battles are all around. Who are the people asking for this kind of hospitality, this kind of servant leadership? What is our work at this time as we join in celebrating and co-creating Key West as “One Human Family”? Let's commit ourselves to this discernment. We submit to the disciplines modeled by our Savior, our Sovereign, our Servant Leader, even Christ Jesus, a priest forever after the order of Melchizedek.