

**A Sermon from the Episcopal Parish of
St. John the Evangelist in Hingham, Massachusetts**
Preached by the Rev. Timothy E. Schenck on October 17, 2021 (Proper 24, Year B)

One of the things our teachers always told us in school is that, “there are no stupid questions.” They’d tell us this to make sure that everyone felt comfortable participating in class discussions. And to insure that learning and conversation were never stifled because one of the students was afraid of looking foolish. It’s an important point to make, as learning is ultimately about exploration, about trying new things, about taking risks. Sometimes they’d even follow-up by saying, “The only stupid question is the question not asked.”

But here’s a little secret our teachers never told us: there are *some* stupid questions. And in the Bible the case in point is right before our very eyes this morning. James and John ask Jesus the ultimate stupid question: “Grant us to sit,” they ask, “one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory.”

These two brothers just don’t get it. I mean, they’ve missed the entire point of everything that Jesus has ever said about discipleship, about ministry, about faith. And James and John aren’t just some peripheral disciples who really weren’t that into this Jesus stuff. Not only had they literally dropped their fishing nets to follow Jesus they, along with Peter, made up Jesus’ inner circle. Who’s with Jesus at the Transfiguration? Peter, James, and John. Who’s with Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane? Peter, James, and John.

So, at one level, it must have been disheartening for Jesus to hear them ask this question. To learn that they were more concerned with the trappings of power and prestige, than being clothed in humility and compassion. James and John apparently think that proximity to the throne of Jesus will bring them benefits and status, both in this world and in the age to come. But they’ve completely misunderstood the kingship of Jesus. They’re under the mistaken impression that the crown of Jesus is a crown of jewels, rather than a crown of thorns.

James and John were among the first to make this mistake, but certainly not the last. If you think following Jesus will get you a corner office, you’ve probably misread the signs. If you think following Jesus will put you in the corridors of power, you’ve probably misread the signs. If you think following Jesus will gain you a place of honor, you’ve probably misread the signs.

That’s not to say many in the church haven’t misread the signs over the years. Or that many who profess Jesus Christ as Lord haven’t misread the signs. Joel Osteen drives a Ferrari. There are clerics who revel in the opulence of their office, more concerned with status than service. There are politicians who speak the name of Jesus, but whose actions effectively trample all over his words.

We forget, at our own peril, that humility is a profound Christian virtue. And I think this is a particular challenge for us Americans who so often equate humility with weakness. We’re taught to seize the day, that might makes right, that only the strong survive. Which doesn’t leave much room for humility, for giving away power and prestige, rather than stockpiling it.

One of the prayers we say at the 8 o’clock service is known as the Prayer of Humble Access. It was removed from the contemporary language rite, but part of me wishes it wasn’t. It’s prayed by the priest and people just before receiving communion. And it begins, “We do not presume to come to this thy Table, O merciful Lord, trusting in our own righteousness, but in thy manifold and great mercies. We are not worthy so much as to gather up the crumbs under thy Table.”

I find it interesting that much of the liturgical language of humility has fallen out of favor over the years. It’s seen by some as overly penitential, even as groveling. With successive Prayer Book revisions the focus has shifted, rightly so in my opinion, to the joy of God’s presence among us rather than on the utter depravity of human sinfulness. But if we never use this language of humility before God we tend to forget our place in the world. Our self-righteousness can take over and we slowly but surely put ourselves on the same plane with God, rather than taking our place as humble servants of God.

If some of this spirit of humility isn’t retained in our spiritual lives, we are poorer for it. We are indeed worthy to stand before God, as long as we recognize our place in relationship to God. Our brief reading from Job reminds us of our place.

Job upon whom all sorts of calamities have fallen, demands that God answer his questions about why this has happened to him. And God’s response is to tell Job, with just a hint of snark, that there are things about which a mere mortal cannot possibly know. “Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth? Who determined its measurements — surely you know!” And, of course, Job was nowhere to be found when the world was created. There’s no debate here, no possible answer to these questions. God alone laid the foundations of the earth and God alone is responsible for our very life.

Which is easy to forget in this age of self-affirmation and self-reliance and self-indulgence and self-justification. Which is why I appreciate that Prayer of Humble Access. Only by God’s grace are we worthy to gather up the crumbs under thy table. Only by God’s grace are we worthy to be in relationship with Jesus Christ.

Jesus doesn't condemn James and John for asking their stupid question. He understands the weakness and absurdity so deeply embedded in our human nature. And he tells them that they will indeed take their place with him — not through some human understanding of honor and privilege. But that they will drink the cup that he will drink and be baptized with the baptism with which he is baptized. This won't involve career advancement or fancy new clothes. In the short-term, it will mean persecution and martyrdom. In the long-term it will mean taking their place with Jesus in the kingdom of heaven.

James and John will get it, eventually. But this episode shows us just how alluring are the outward signs of rank and wealth. Remember, when Jesus was tempted in the wilderness, the devil held out before him all the kingdoms of earth. "All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me." And Jesus replies, "Worship the Lord your God and serve only him."

Despite Jesus' clear message that he "came not to be served, but to serve," despite all of his actions that point towards a servant ministry, from washing the disciples' feet to laying down his life for his friends, we all seem to need constant reminders that to follow Jesus is to give rather than take, to share power rather than to hoard it.

James and John will indeed share in Christ's glory. They will attain that crown of righteousness that is reserved for those who follow Jesus. But they will get there not by amassing power and prestige and privilege, but by giving it away. By serving others, rather than by being served. By reveling in God's glory, rather than their own.

In the meantime, please do keep asking questions. Just, when you're hanging out with Jesus, maybe not *that* question.