

“The Strongest Stuff in the World”
Sermon by Rev. Aaron D. Fulp-Eickstaedt
Immanuel Presbyterian Church, McLean VA
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Hebrews 5:1-10, Mark 10:35-45

Our first passage today comes from the letter to the Hebrews, which as I said last week is actually more of an early Christian sermon or a word of exhortation to a community which had grown tired of keeping the faith, tired of keeping up their prayer life, tired even, perhaps, of Jesus. In the section of the letter I am about to read, the author continues a theme he picked up on last week, talking about Jesus as a sort of high priest, called or designated by God to mediate between God and human beings. Listen to how the words “submission” and “obedience”, two words that we rarely use in the mainline church, are used.. And listen to how he applies them to Jesus. *Read Hebrews here.*

Our second reading today comes from the Gospel of Mark, the 10th chapter, beginning with the 35th verse. You should know that just prior to the beginning of this passage, as Mark tells it, Jesus has just finished telling the disciples for the third time that he is going to Jerusalem where he will be handed over to suffer and die, but will rise again. The first time he predicted his suffering and death, Peter rebuked him saying, “God forbid, this will never happen to you.” The second time, the disciples responded by arguing amongst themselves on the road about who was the greatest. And now, listen in this passage, for how James and John seem to miss the whole point of what Jesus has just said. It is so classically Mark’s gospel. The disciples are portrayed as clueless stumblebums on the road of spirituality. *Read Mark here.*

It was a blatant, naked grab for power and prestige, a plea for preferential treatment. For the longest time, that has been the way I’ve read James and John’s request of Jesus in Mark’s gospel. When the Sons of Thunder sidled up to Jesus and asked for places on his right and left when he came into his glory, they were interested only in enhancing their own position, boosting their own egos. That’s the way I’ve always read it. And that was surely the way the rest of the twelve experienced their request. I can just hear the angry whispers of the other ten disciples now. “Just who do James and John think they are? Asking for special favors! Seats on Jesus’ right and left! That takes a lot of gall! Who do these guys think they are, huh?”

No, the rest of the twelve didn’t like James and John’s little ploy one bit. Part of me wonders if that’s because the brothers asked Jesus their question before the others could even think to ask it themselves. Kind of like the battles over the front seat of the car that happen in families - and used to happen more before the advent of airbags. I know they used to happen between my brother and me. “I get to sit in the front. I called it first! But Mom, I called it. No, I called it.” Ever heard something like that? Said it?

Whether the rest of the disciples got angry with them or not, it can’t be denied that James and John really were asking for positions of honor. They wanted to sit up front. They called it. The question is, “Why?” Maybe James and John were indeed simply motivated by a lust for power, recognition, ego

strokes and the feeling of being special. They wouldn't be the first or the last to have that sort of motivation. Everyone likes to have their contributions noticed and recognized.

But this week, it struck me that their request to sit on Jesus' right and left may have been motivated by something else. Maybe James and John just wanted to be close to Jesus, as close as they could get, glory or no glory. After all, along with Peter, they had been his closest followers right along. We don't like to think about Jesus having an inner circle, but if you notice in the gospels, he's fairly often pulling Peter and James and John apart for special instruction. And he would do so again. Over the course of his earthly ministry, James and John had developed a close connection with Jesus. Perhaps they just wanted to continue that closeness, especially knowing that things were coming to a head soon. That's what Jesus had just told the twelve. For the third time, their Lord had told them that he was going to have to suffer and die. Whether they wanted any part of his suffering and death or not, James and John clearly wanted to be close to him on the other side of it. They wanted to be close to Jesus in his glory, even if they couldn't always be close to him in his suffering.

I believe that was true of James and John. But what about you and me? Think about what brought you to church this morning. There are all kinds of motivations for coming to church, including coming because "that's just what a respectable person does," or "because my parents made me" or because, "God expects me to do this, and if I let God down, God will get me," or because, "this is a place where I can see and hang out with my friends." There are all kinds of reasons people come to church.

But at some level, deeper than we may know or be able to articulate, I believe what brings every single one of us here to church is a desire to grow closer to God; the God Jesus came to enflesh. At some level of our being, whatever age we happen to be, every single one of us is hungry for encounter with God. Oh, we can cover up that hunger. We can pretend it isn't there. We can flat out deny it. We can twist it, distort it, or try to fill it with other things - and sometimes we do. But the hunger to get close to God is there in each and every one of us.

Some of the best, most thought-provoking theological conversations I've ever had have been with young people who aren't sure that God even exists, but have a hunger for something more in life. The other day I came across some email conversations I had with a young man, then in his twenties, who was the son of the church secretary in the congregation I served in North Carolina. I'll call him Thomas.

Thomas was very bright, fun to converse with. He'd make a great Presbyterian - he has a good mind and he's not afraid to use it. Thomas told me he wasn't exactly sure what he believed. But one thing he was looking for was some sure, clear proof that the God we know in Jesus Christ really exists, and is not just some idea that people make up.

Thomas told me he wanted to experience the God made known in Jesus that people had told him about. Other people had told him about their close relationship with God, but Thomas had too much intellectual integrity to pretend that God existed when he wasn't sure. If only God would make God's self known to him, in just the way Thomas was looking for, within the expectations Thomas had set up for the experience, then Thomas told me he would know for certain, and he, too, could believe and have a relationship with God.

In some ways, Thomas was not unlike James and John. They came to Jesus and said, “Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you.” Now Thomas never said that he wanted a seat at Jesus’ right or left, but like the sons of Zebedee, he was asking for closeness with the God we have come to know in Jesus Christ on his own terms. But that’s not how intimacy with the God we know in Jesus comes. It comes not on our terms, but on His.

So when James and John asked to sit up front with Jesus, he turned around and responded, “You don’t know what you are asking. *Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized?*” Now it goes without saying that Jesus wasn’t talking about ritually participating in the sacraments here. He wasn’t talking about being baptized as an infant and having communion once a month, even it makes the service run a little long. Jesus was telling those who would be close to him then and now that they would have to participate in the kind of life he lived - drinking the cup of vulnerable, boundary transcending love that he drank and undergoing the baptism of obedience to God’s will that he underwent.

Later, in the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus would ask for the cup of vulnerable, boundary-transcending love to pass from him. He knew that drinking it would hurt. But on the cross, he drank that cup to its dregs. He wound up on the cross not to fulfill an equation, like the one somebody sent me on email a long time ago - one cross, plus three nails equals four-given. He wound up there because he cared enough about God’s sort of love that he reached out to people on the margins of society and angered the authorities in the process. He wound up there because he believed there were some things worth standing up for and some things worth standing up against. He wound up there because love can be costly - and to drink its cup is to become vulnerable enough to forgive, to give generously, to practice hospitality, to serve joyfully, and to take risks for the sake of love. That’s the cup.

The baptism Jesus underwent was an utter immersion in God’s will. He was so thoroughly immersed in God that he was able to die to self-centeredness, to go to the cross and even from that vantage point see those who would hurt him through the eyes of love.

The Sacrament of Baptism, whether we sprinkle infants or do what some other denominations do and dunk adults, is intended to echo that kind of immersion in the will of a loving God. Even when we sprinkle infants, we make promises as parents and congregational members that we intend to immerse them in the environment of Jesus so that they will look at the world in terms of his priorities, his love. To put it another way, we are hoping to hold them under long enough so that they experience the truth that somehow in Jesus Christ, an old way of life has died and a new way of life has begun. You see? It is about immersion after all, even when we sprinkle.

Most of you know, and not because I’ve shared it from the pulpit by the way, I don’t talk about this from the pulpit, that I am a life-long Chicago Cubs fan. This is the first time I’ve talked about that from the pulpit in four and a half years, and I promise I won’t talk about it again for another four and a half - and hopefully by that time they will have won the World Series. Though I hesitate to link my rooting for the Cubs with drinking the cup of suffering or being baptized with Jesus baptism, I have been known to get immersed in their fortunes.

Back in October of 2003, I had a most gut-wrenching experience. They were up three games to one and I really thought that would be the year, the first year since 1945 that they would actually get to the World Series, maybe the first year since 1908 that they'd win it. But it wasn't to be. And it hurt. It hurt much more than a sports team's failure should hurt. After all, it really is just a game.

Knowing how immersed I had become in the Cubs, a number of people called me the day after they were eliminated to see how I was doing, "We knew you were living and dying with every pitch," they said. And I was. "We knew it would feel almost like a death," they said. And it did. I had lost perspective. It was as if my whole identity had become wrapped up in my team's identity. It was almost like I lost myself. But if they had actually won, I don't think you would have found a happier, more ecstatic person on earth. Remember when I say that, that ecstasy comes from a Greek word "ekstasis", meaning to get outside of one's stasis or settledness - outside of one's self. To put it simply, I would have experienced joy.

It may seem like a silly example, (and in fact it is), but it gets to the heart of what Jesus is telling James and John, and by my extension the young man Tom that I was conversing with about the existence of God. And it also gets to the heart of what Jesus might be saying to you and me. I think Jesus was saying something like this to them and us, "If you want to be close to me, you have to get immersed in my life and priorities, so that your identity gets wrapped up in my identity. If you want to know real joy, if you want to be close to me, you'll have to get immersed enough in me to know what it is to serve. It's not for me to say who sits on the right and left in God's kingdom. That's God's call to make. But if you want to get close to God, and close to me, Jesus says here's what you do. Learn how to serve. Learn to get outside of yourself for the sake of God and others."

A poet named Rabindath Tagore spoke to this when he said,

*I slept and dreamt that life was Joy;
Then I awoke and realized that life was Service.
And then I went to work - and lo and behold
I discovered that Service is Joy.¹*

Albert Schweitzer, the great philosopher, musician, and missionary doctor to Africa, communicated something very similar when he wrote

*Life becomes harder for us when we live for others,
But it also becomes richer and happier.²*

If we want to get close to God, to Jesus, in the here and now, we have to surrender our egos enough to let God's sort of vulnerable, boundary-transcending love live in us. I said as much in one of my email responses to my conversation partner Thomas, who wasn't sure of God's existence. I had asked him what, for him, was the essence of the Christian message. And he answered this way. "I assume you mean the 'real' Christian message. Simply put, it's about finding God and having a relationship with Him. To serve God and have God work in your life and bless you as he blesses others through you."

Here's what I wrote in response.

“That’s a wonderful answer, Thomas. Jesus might say, ‘You are not far from the kingdom of God.’ He said the same thing to a scribe who responded to his query about which was the greatest commandment by saying, *‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength and love your neighbor as yourself.’*”

“You have gotten very close to the core of the Christian message, Thomas, at least as I understand it and seek to live it. But for me, there is a bit more depth to it. When Jesus said, *‘I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life’* I think he was getting at that depth. When he ‘sweated blood’ in the Garden of Gethsemane as he prayed, *‘Father, if there be any other way, let this cup pass from me, but nevertheless, not my will, but Thine be done.’* He was getting at that depth.

When he emptied himself to the point of dying on a cross, and from that vantage point said, *‘into your hands I commit my spirit,’* he was getting at that depth. The Way, the Truth, and the Life that is embodied in Jesus Christ is the way of vulnerability: loving not only God, but others, to the point that I might just get hurt. When I’m vulnerable, someone might hurt me. But vulnerability is the only way one can know true intimacy with God or with anyone else for that matter.

“For me, Thomas, the cross is not something I point to and say, “The magic formula was enacted here; I believe that Jesus died on that cross for me, so I can say, I’m in.” The cross and resurrection of Jesus are my salvation not so because they mean I might go to heaven when I die. They are my salvation because they point me to a way of life, the only way of life which is worth living - a life of vulnerability, a life in which I can love fully and be fully loved because I am not always trying to protect myself.

“It is when I am vulnerable that I know real love - and when I know real love, I know something of God, because God is love. That doesn’t mean I will see God as an apparition standing at the head of my bed. I might, but I might not. I may never see God face to face in quite that way, at least on this side of my death. But I sense God at work in the love I have for others and the love they have for me. I sense God at work when I see other people get outside of themselves enough to really care for someone else. I sense God at work in the time I’m taking to sit down and right a response to you, Thomas.

“But back to vulnerability for a moment. Vulnerability is a very scary thing. There are all kinds of things we can do to avoid it, including intellectualizing and ‘missing the forest for the trees.’ So a few more questions for you to ponder, Thomas, before I go any further.

“1. Could it be possible that your reliance on intellect might be cutting you off from sensing where God is already active in your life? Could your dependence on your gifted intellect (I really do enjoy having a conversation with someone as smart as you seem to be), be a way of avoiding real deep, committed intimacy with others (not to mention God)? Only you can answer those questions - and I really don't know that the answer is “yes” for you, Tom - I'm just throwing it out there for you to contemplate.

“2. Might it be possible that in this conversation, albeit through e-mail, you are getting something of the encounter with God that you say you're interested in? I'm not saying I'm God, mind you--but perhaps the God I've come to know in Jesus Christ could use even a minister (believe me, I know how flawed ministers can be, and I've known some for whom I don't have much respect) to address you personally. By the way, I think the God I've come to know in Christ uses all kinds of people to address me and others. Even people that don't think they're being used by Him; even you, Thomas, even you.”

The way into relationship with God is investment in the priorities of Jesus; reaching out with boundary transcending love and living out real service. Barbara Brown Taylor in one of her wonderful sermons says that this sort of reaching out is a power that is “the strongest stuff in the world” - the power to serve.³

The other night at our Session meeting, we were talking about bringing new members into the congregation, and the importance of training new members, and having expectations of new members. The thought was we don't want to set the bar too low. After all, serving God is worth investing in God's priorities.

So, if you are a prospective new member, or you've been a member of this church for a long time, or if you are somewhere in between, hear this challenge. *Serving God is worth investing in God's priorities.*

Amen.

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¹ Rabindath Tagore, *The Gardener*, 1915. See http://www.quoteland.com/author.asp?AUTHOR_ID=749

² This Albert Schweitzer quote can be found at the following website. I've not been able to locate the original source: http://thinkexist.com/quotation/the_purpose_of_human_life_is_to_serve_and_to_show/146836.html

³ Barbara Brown Taylor, “The Trickle Up Effect” in *Bread of Angels* (Cambridge: Cowley, 1997), p. 45.

