



# SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

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THE TWENTY SECOND SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST – OCTOBER 21, 2018  
ISAIAH 53:4-12; PSALM 91:9-16; HEBREWS 5:1-10; MARK 10:35-45

## GREAT ENOUGH

**MARK 10:35-45** [*James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came forward to Jesus and said to him, “Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you.” And he said to them, “What is it you want me to do for you?” And they said to him, “Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory.” But Jesus said to them, “You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?” They replied, “We are able.” Then Jesus said to them, “The cup that I drink you will drink; and with the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized; but to sit at my right hand or at my left is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared.”*]

*When the ten heard this, they began to be angry with James and John. So Jesus called them and said to them, “You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.”]*

I flew Southwest Airlines last week, and it's got open seating. I hope you heard that as “free for all” seating. Because it is, although not entirely. The way you get a choice seat on Southwest is, of course, first of all, to pay extra to belong to the elite who get to board first. And then it's groups. So, of course, my husband Jim and I do not want to pay extra just to get to board first, although he is 6'4" and the man needs an aisle seat. So we check in exactly 24 hours ahead of our flight, on the button, as if we're trying to get tickets to *Hamilton* or something, for goodness sake.

Because where you sit matters. And on the countdown/button of 24 hours ahead, I check us in and we are in Group B numbers 19 and 20. Who was faster on the computer than I was? But so it is – because if you don't do something to make yourself special, you're not going to be in group A.

James and John in today's Gospel know all about that, and they are on the button. The other guys get mad, sure – because they didn't think of it first! They're the ones who forgot

about checking in until later in the day. Group C, guys. No aisle seats for you.

So my airline analogy seems like just a funny little story, but really, seriously, when I'm lining up to get onto the airplane, I am worried about how good my seat is going to be. Is Jim going to be on the aisle? Is there going to be room in the overhead bin by the time we get on the plane? Are we going to be stuck over the wing so I can't see Mt. Rainier? Are we going to be too close to the bathroom? I want a better seat for me – more than worrying about any of that stuff for you.

But what if I just waited until the very end, so other people who wanted the good seats could have first crack? That has *never* occurred to me in lining up at the airport.

So can I blame James and John for wanting the good seat? Where would you rather spend eternity than right next to Jesus? The greatest of seats.

There's a fine distinction I'm making here, because we all are inevitably, to greater and lesser degrees, coopted by our culture that feeds our ego-centric need to be greater than somebody. I'm not delivering you any news here, right? We know our culture fires up on fame, hoards what we think should be OURS alone, measures greatness by power and glamour. And we Christians know Jesus said that to follow him we need to be servants. And I think we, as Christians, do believe that,

and most of us, most of the time, try to act on that.

So back to the airplane. I AM on the button at 24 hours so I can get a better seat than you. I'm aggressive about it. I'm also a Christian. If you and I are in line together, and you say to me, "Could I get on the plane first? I have a tight connection." I would say, "Of course. Please, go ahead." I'm pretty kind, one-to-one.

But my gotta-get-a-good-seat self often is driving this internal first-in-line anxiety. Jesus is on a different track, a less anxious track. That's where I hear Jesus calling me to transformation, calling our culture to transformation, calling our nation to transformation, calling **us** to BE the Kingdom of God – BEING last, being servant, in mindset and in heart-set – in my own, internal culture, regardless of the culture all around me.

That's where James and John were a little off, and where we get a little off, too. They didn't mean any harm to the others. They just wanted it known, recognized, that they were the greatest; they logged on first (!) and they deserved the good seats. Just like I don't mean any harm to other people when I want good things. I just for little while forget to think about that they want the good seats, too. And, of course, it's not about seats. It's about our ethos of who deserves what!

How are we, Christ's body here on Earth, embodying the Kingdom of God?

The spiritual teacher and author Eckhart Tolle said, "Jesus [said] the kingdom of heaven does not come with signs to be perceived. [Luke 17:20] What does that mean? It means you can never say, 'Oh, there it is.' Why can't you say, 'Oh there it is?' Because you ARE it."<sup>1</sup>

Think about that. You ARE it. YOU are it. The Kingdom of Heaven is realized in each of us when we truly embody Christ consciousness. Maybe that's why we say the Kingdom is already and not yet. Because Jesus already has given us the way to be the kingdom, right now. We are it. But we haven't embraced it yet. Not yet. Not fully.

It's not enough to only see Jesus when someone is eyeball-to-eyeball with us. We need to hold everyone, all creation, eyeball-to-eyeball. We need that impulse to service, that mentality of service, that Christian call to service overall, because it IS what Jesus told us and showed us. *That* is what needs to be cultivated as our genuine feeling, as our ethos: when we buy things, when we consume our planet, when we vote, when we decide who gets to live with us in safety and have services that Jesus would never have denied them, when we interact with each other, eyeball-to-eyeball – and in the anonymity of our angry driving and our begrudging tax paying and our snarky social media comments and our self-righteous

NIMBYness. This is where we must embody, where we must BE the Kingdom.

How shall we embrace and embody it? By lining up at Jesus' right and left hand, at the end of the line, in service to others – all others. Last. That's where Jesus IS. That's what he straight up says – so it's not a mystery how to be great enough to be at his right and left.

Jesus has changed what greatness means, where the good seats are. We who claim to follow him know that, but we haven't in 2000-plus years managed to shift our culture, and ourselves, to reflect that. Greatness, for us, still looks a lot like it would have to James and John: sitting at the right and left hand, of the most awesome, powerful, rich and famous throne.

Martin Luther King, Jr. gave a sermon on this very Gospel at Ebenezer Baptist Church two months before he was assassinated. He preached that Jesus' followers should indeed be striving for greatness, but Jesus transformed the situation. King preached, "[Jesus] said in substance, 'Oh, I see, you want to be first. You want to be great. You want to be important. You want to be significant. Well, you ought to be. If you're going to be my disciple, you must be.' But he reordered priorities. And he said... 'Keep feeling the need for being important. Keep feeling the need for being first. But I want you to be first in love. I want you to be first in moral excellence. I want you to be first in

generosity. That is what I want you to do.’...And by giving that definition of greatness, it means that everybody can be great, because everybody can serve... you can be on his right hand and his left hand if you serve. It’s the only way in.”<sup>2</sup>

So if we who profess to believe this Gospel, if we believe what Jesus says to his disciples, where is Jesus’ right and left hand right now? He is sitting in desperation in the Sea-Tac Detention Center. He is sitting beside the mother who is terrified she won’t be able to feed her children if the proposed rule change to “[public charge](#)” goes through and devastates our communities by making immigrant families afraid to access essential health, nutrition, and shelter programs – and there are only a few weeks left to submit comments on it.<sup>3</sup> Jesus is in last pew of the Filipino Church, Iglecia Ni Cristo, in Seattle’s Rainier Valley, that was attacked with Molotov cocktails during a church service Thursday night. Jesus is with the last: the last person in line at the borders, who’s afraid of

the violence at their back and the hatred and family separation still rampant at their front.

Are we great enough to sit *there* with Jesus? Because when we are confronted with an individual who looks us in the eye and needs us, we’re pretty great about being Christians. But are we ready to BE the full-on Kingdom of God, and change what greatness means writ large?

Bishop and martyr Oscar Romero of El Salvador, who was canonized a saint this month, wrote, “A church that does not provoke any crisis, preach a gospel that does not unsettle, proclaim a word of God that does not get under anyone’s skin or a word of God that does not touch the real sin of the society in which it is being proclaimed: what kind of gospel is that?”<sup>4</sup>

It is unsettling there in the back. But it’s where Jesus is.

<sup>1</sup> Eckhart Tolle, “The Wisdom of the Present Moment,” Meditation 2.0 2014, on YouTube, March 2, 2014, accessed October 19, 2018 at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=foU1qgOdtwg>.

<sup>2</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr., “The Drum Major Instinct, Sermon Delivered at Ebenezer Baptist Church,” February 4, 1968, Stanford University, The Martin Luther King, Jr. Research and Education Institute, accessed October 19, 2018 at <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king->

[papers/documents/drum-major-instinct-sermon-delivered-ebenezer-baptist-church](#).

<sup>3</sup> “Stop Trump’s Cruel Attack on Immigrant Families,” Protecting Immigrant Families, accessed October 19, 2018 at [https://protectingimmigrantfamilies.org/#take-action?utm\\_campaign=p-PES&utm\\_content=PF-&utm\\_source=gs&utm\\_medium=se](https://protectingimmigrantfamilies.org/#take-action?utm_campaign=p-PES&utm_content=PF-&utm_source=gs&utm_medium=se).

<sup>4</sup> Oscar Romero, “The Violence of Love,” San Francisco, CA: Orbis Books, 1988, p. 44.