

What Glory Looks Like

Mark 10:35-45

James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came forward to him 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." (Mark 10:35-37)

You have to hand it to James and John for sheer nerve. In this Gospel story, Mark records what might be the boldest request recorded in the New Testament. The request is made by the guys Jesus calls, "Sons of Thunder," two brothers who leave their father's lucrative fishing business to become disciples. The nickname is an apt one for young men so hotheaded, they ask Jesus elsewhere in the Gospels to rain heavenly fire on a Samaritan village that refuses them hospitality (Luke 9:51-56).

As the story opens, Jesus is making his way to Jerusalem, all the while telling his disciples that torment and death await him there. Cue the Sons of Thunder: "Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you." Astonishingly, Jesus responds to this presumption with patient curiosity: "What is it you want me to do?" "Grant us to sit," they respond without hesitation, "one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory."

"Glory" isn't a word we use much nowadays. It's a churchy word we hear in sermons and hymns. But let's face it: we have our modern synonyms. Though our vocabulary differs, we recognize too well what James and John are asking for. Prestige, fame, praise, distinction, success, honor, renown. In short, the Sons of Thunder want to finish first, win big, and retire as privileged favorites with intimate access to Jesus's power and glory. In fact, they don't simply *want* these things; they're convinced that they *deserve* them.

It's easy to laugh, or to dismiss the two boys as fools. But Jesus takes the request seriously and engages in a conversation that is compassionate rather than condemning. Let's pause for a moment and consider what James and John get right in this story.

First, the two brothers place their full faith in the right person. Undaunted by Jesus's gloomy predictions of suffering, they cling to the belief that he will prevail in the end. Though they have no concrete idea what Jesus means by "resurrection," they trust him—his word, his power, his leadership, his mission. Given what they've seen, heard, and experienced, they can't conceive of a meaningful future apart from their teacher. Their personal hopes and dreams, imperfect though they might be, are rooted in Jesus.

Second, they are ambitious for the reign of God. They expect and want Jesus to be glorified; they expect and want the world's wrongs to be righted. They're not complacent about injustice, oppression, hatred, and violence; they actively long for Jesus to remake the world. Interestingly, Jesus does not criticize James and John for these ambitions. He doesn't say, "It's wrong of you to want greatness. It's sinful of you to strive."

Instead, he redirects their striving. He offers them a different definition of greatness. This suggests to me that God can and will work with our desires and ambitions. God *wants* us to want more, seek more, hope more, and need more. What's lethal to the spiritual life is apathy. Desires can be redirected. Ambitions can be purified. But an unwillingness to care? A numbness of soul? A refusal to hope because we fear disappointment? These are the dead ends. These are the roadblocks to grace and transformation.

Thirdly, James and John *ask*. They approach Jesus boldly and make their request with confidence. Is the request tacky? Yes. Is it borne of ignorance and immaturity? Yes. Are some of the motives behind the request selfish? Yes. And yet, *they ask*.

They engage in real relationship with Jesus and express an authentic desire to remain close to him. As I reflect on this, I am reminded of how often I don't ask, don't engage, and don't lean. How often I go through my days as if God doesn't exist, even as I profess to be God's child, God's follower, God's friend. Real relationships require honest engagement. They require love, affection, and an ongoing desire for intimacy. James and John exemplify all of these traits in their friendship with Jesus, and I would do well to follow in their footsteps. After all, the Sons of Thunder aren't just disciples; they're members of Jesus's beloved inner circle. Jesus allows them to witness many things the other disciples don't. There's something about their unguarded approach and demeanor that Jesus cherishes.

So, okay. The Sons of Thunder get some things right. But they also get a key thing wrong, and that's where the heart of this Gospel story lies. The easiest way to describe their error is to contrast the demand they make of Jesus with the question Jesus asks them in return. "Teacher," they say, "we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you." In other words: "We're entitled to something here, Lord. We're willing to wait patiently, but you'll

need to give us our due in the end. After all, we've sacrificed a lot to be your disciples. What's in it for us?"

In return, Jesus asks the question he always asks: "What is it you want me to do for you?" Not, "Here's what I want," or, "Here's what I'm entitled to," but rather, "I am here to serve. How can I serve you?"

What James and John fail to understand is that service in the kingdom of God is not a second-class means to a first-class end. Service *is* the end. Service is abundance. Service is power. Service is glory. "Whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first must be slave of all" (Matt 20:26). By all means aspire to glory! But recognize that glory by Jesus's definition is not an accretion of privilege. It's not upward mobility. It's not permission to guard and hoard. Glory in God's kingdom is an exercise in subtraction. It's a movement downwards. It's the generous and perpetual expending of one's self in love.

I wonder if the fantasies of earth-shattering power and glory we impose on God are just that—our own fantasies. Maybe such a God is easier to deal with, more familiar, more palatable, more impressive. Why bother getting involved in the world's sorrows if God can wave a magic wand and fix everything while we wine and dine at some heavenly banquet? Why lean into our own creativity, why respond to our own deep longings for justice, why call each other out to engage in the slow, risky work of renewing creation, when "glory" means grabbing the fanciest seats in the throne room? Why contemplate a Jesus who glories in serving his guests—refilling their water glasses, warming up their leftovers, preparing their rooms, washing their feet—when we can worship Superman instead?

This story leaves us with two questions. Two options. James and John seek glory by privileging themselves: "Do *for us*. Grant *us*." Jesus epitomizes glory by privileging others: "What can *I* do *for you*?"

Dare we trade one question for the other? Dare we surrender privilege for glory? The invitation is to mature in a downward direction—to serve, serve, and serve some more. Can we find the courage to make Christ's trajectory our own?