

Isaiah 53: 4-12  
Psalm 91: 9-16  
Hebrews 5: 1-10  
Mark 10: 35-45.

Rev. Laura Palmer  
St. Martin-in-the-Fields  
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## A King Worth Having

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to thee, O Lord, my strength and my redeemer, Amen.

Children have a way of calling us up short, and sometimes, quite abruptly. So it was one day for me in the hospital when I asked a precocious seven-year-old patient if she wanted to pray. "Can I say the words?"

My chaplain's heart was aglow. Of course, I said. We held hands, as we always did (pre-pandemic) when we prayed and she said, "Dear Jesus, Thank you for killing yourself so we could be good."

I was blindsided but forced to acknowledge that drilled down, this interpretation was at the heart of traditional church teaching. Oh, for the lofty halls of seminary and the theory of substitutionary atonement. For a scared 7-year-old that was something else entirely, but it was what her conservative faith had taught her. It was not my job – in fact it would have been chaplaincy malpractice-- to dismantle her family and faith's beliefs. She was already angry at God for "giving" her cancer and once when I offered to pray an angry prayer with her, she declined, saying she feared God might do something "worsen" to her. The doctors couldn't tell her why she got cancer so it must have been from God.

Ah, the vengeful omnipotent God, the God of tyrants, ready and waiting to lash out to any challenge to his authority, demanding the complete submission of his believers. Jesus, as his life and death affirms, was insisting and modeling another kind of power: the power to love, and to serve in love, which routinely knocked his disciples off course.

In Mark's gospel this morning, the disciples, James and John, are understandably worried. Jesus has spoken openly of his imminent death as they head towards Jerusalem. They left jobs and family to follow him and now worry about what will happen to them when he's gone. So in an audacious move, James and John swing for the stands: "Teacher, we want you to do whatever we ask of you."

Jesus asks, "What would that be?" Curious, he's willing to serve. Maybe they needed a rest. More food. Just the opposite. They're gunning for the prime heavenly real estate and propose that when Jesus comes into his "glory" and sits on the heavenly throne, one of them will be on his left, the other, on his right.

Jesus cuts them off. "You do not know what you are asking." They've missed the point entirely. Jesus' ministry had never been about power, domination or favoritism. It was far more radical and had never existed before. Humility, service, and unconditional love were the essence of his preaching and teaching.

Are you able to drink the cup? Jesus asks? Can you embrace the suffering that's ahead? It's the question all of us will face at some point in our lives and it is excruciating. Even Jesus asked it at Gethsemane when he implores God to "take this cup." Facing into his death was terrifying and utterly human even for Jesus.

He knew his disciples still really had no idea what they were in for although of course they insist that they do. Jesus flips the tables yet again. Even if you do "drink the cup" there's still no guarantee. That's for God to decide.

Imagine how jarring that was. The disciples had seen a series of miracles...the sick were healed, the blind could see, 5,000 were fed and the dead raised. There was no doubt about Jesus' divine power. But was this the end of the road? Were they going to be returning to their fishing boats? There was no way the resurrection could mean to them what it does to us.

For the disciples, Jesus the miracle maker was a king worth having. They had been blown away by his divine powers. No doubt. But did they fully appreciate the love? As author and theologian Barbara Brown Taylor writes:

With all kinds of opportunities to tell people what to think, he told them *what to do* instead and showed them how to live: Wash feet. Give your stuff away. Share your food. *Honor* all God's children. Pray for those who are against you. Be the first to say, "I'm sorry." Being fully human in these ways became a full-time job for his followers. It became a vocation in itself, no matter what they happened to do for a living.<sup>1</sup>

This was what my young patient could not appreciate; the love that saved her life and made it possible for her to be a teenager a decade later who didn't want to talk about God anymore. One day, perhaps, she'll appreciate more fully how her doctor's research involved creating a mouse with her precise cancer to better target drugs to treat her disease. Beneath all the training and dedication there is a love grounding pediatric oncologists that verges on vocation.

Rev. Sharline Fulton, beloved by many in this parish, myself included, once told me the story of her son, Jamie's, death. He was in his early forties when he died in 2001 and she was by his bedside in the hospital. Her suffering and grief were immense. Yet she had no doubt that God was with her in her pain. Then she thought of a God who suffers with all of us and the power it took to fuel the enormity of that love was beyond comprehension.

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<sup>1</sup> Taylor, Barbara Brown, *An Altar in the World*, Deckle Edge, 2009 pp. 118–119

It is not the power of tyrants. Jesus warns his disciples about that. His power is not domination but love. "For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve."

The choice is always ours just as it was for the disciples. How do we love and who do we serve? We choose, in ways large and small, every day of our lives.

This nation has a stark choice which will be made in 15 days or so. Vengeance is on the ballot. "Retribution will be my success," says a candidate who openly talks about using force and jailing his political enemies, "the enemy within" and who describes Jan. 6<sup>th</sup> as "a day of love." A candidate whose racist lies demonize millions of brown and black people he speaks of rounding up, putting in camps, and deporting.

In the stained-glass window behind me and in front of you, Jesus walks toward us holding a chalice. "Whenever you drink it, do this in remembrance of me."

Jesus' life-giving and liberating *love* was, and still is, poured out for us. His broken body and his cries of abandonment were a portrait of defeat on the cross.

But that was not the end of the story. Evil may triumph but ultimately, love wins which is just divine and why, 2,000 years later, we're still here. AMEN.