

Mark 10:35-45 (NRSV)

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." 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."

Grace to you and peace, from God our Father and from our Lord Jesus Christ.

Earlier this week, Linda and I were sitting at the kitchen table having dinner. As I glanced out the window, a pig walked by. I looked, and looked again and said, "Linda, what is that?" and she calmly said, "That's a pig," and went back to eating. I looked at her. She waited a beat and said, "When it *flies* by, *that's* when I'll get interested."

When pigs fly. It's an expression that people use to remark about something unlikely happening. Having just seen a pig trotting

around my front lawn, I can see where the saying came from. Pigs aren't really built for flying. The particular pig I'd seen is apparently still on the loose – I fully expect to see his face on shopping bags at the Safeway, he's a handsome animal. Tim Schwartz tells me you're all invited over for barbecue if he catches the pig first.

I've been sitting in with Kathy Dangin on the In Crowd Sunday School classes and she's been talking about paradigms – the ideas that shape our perspectives about how things work, how things are done, how things happen. Our paradigms shape how we see things and how we react to them.

The Gospel lesson today describes a paradigm, in a way, and how Jesus wants to change it. James and John come to Jesus and ask him, "Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you." They think they're pretty clever, but Jesus is not fooled. "What is it you want me to do for you?" he asks. And so James and John ask "Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory."

Jesus' reaction to their request is surprisingly gentle. "You don't know what you're asking," he says, but Jesus does. Jesus knows the cup that he will drink, the cup that he will ask to pass from him in the Garden. The cup that he does not want, but won't refuse. Jesus knows the baptism with which he will be baptized. Of course he does. He has just told the disciples about it for the third time. For the third time, Jesus has told the disciples that the Son of Man would be handed over to the chief priests and the scribes and condemned to death by the Romans.

Maybe the question is, do the disciples know? We assume that they have forgotten or haven't gotten it yet, but that isn't really so certain. James and John quickly answer, "We are able." These are, after all, James and John, the sons of Thunder, quick to speak, quick to change their moods, like Peter they are impulsive, impetuous. Can

you imagine that they are scared? They have left everything to follow this Jesus and now he is telling them that the worst really hasn't even begun yet.

But they're holding on to hope. They have been very impressed with what Jesus has been able to do, with the miracles and the healings and feeding the 5,000. They've been impressed enough to have signed on, early, right after Peter and Andrew. And now they are hoping that when their side wins, they'll be the ones to get the cabinet level positions, the ambassador to Ireland or something like that.

See, that's the paradigm. To the victor go the spoils. The bad guys, the Romans and the Temple hierarchy get tossed out and the new guys come in. The Republicans get tossed out and the Democrats get the good jobs, and later on, the Democrats get tossed out and the Republicans get the good jobs. That's the way of the world. That's the paradigm.

Jesus treats them gently, I think, because he understands how hard it is to change a paradigm. I like to think that Jesus looks at them and thinks, "I know that you are not yet who you will become." So, he explains to them. In the Kingdom of God, it's not like that. In the Kingdoms of people, leaders "Lord it over" the ordinary people, the great people among them are tyrants. "But it is not so among you."

This is the hardest thing to understand – this is not how the world works. In the new world we are creating, leaders will be servants, those who are first must be slaves to all. It's altogether normal for the king to ask people to die for the kingdom, but it's very odd that the king would die for the people. That's not the paradigm.

The last line of the Gospel reading says that the Son of Man will give his life as a ransom for many. The word, "ransom" here is a

curious one. One way to understand it is as the price for a slave or a prisoner to be released, the price of a debt to be expiated, a debtor to be released from prison. A ransom.

By what, by whom are people enslaved? By what, by whom are James and John and the rest of the disciples enslaved? Not simply by the Romans or the Temple bureaucrats. No, they are enslaved even more deeply, by the paradigm. The paradigm that winners take all, that to the victor belongs the spoils, that the winning team gets the rewards.

You see, that's what Jesus is fighting against – not the Romans, not the Temple, but the paradigm, what Paul calls the cosmic powers of this present darkness. Because even if you defeat the Romans and the Temple, as long as that paradigm is in place, nothing will ever change. And that is what the ransom was paid for, for a new way of thinking about the world and life and leadership.

As I walked with this Gospel passage over the week, I was struck by the strength of character of James and John and the other leaders of the early church. You might think that is a little strange. Certainly James and John's request seems to suggest precisely the opposite, that they are weak and silly. But, think for a second – this request is recorded in Mark's Gospel and again in Matthew's. Where did this story come from? Who told on James and John? I suppose it is possible that the other disciples told Mark this story about James and John, but I like to think that James and John related it about themselves.

Imagine, then, that you are a leader in this young church, as James and John were, and that in order to prove a point about how foolish and feckless people are, you told this fairly disgraceful story *about yourself*. It seems to me that that shows a certain strength of character.

You see, James and John and Peter and the other disciples *did* get it. They understood not just that Jesus was victorious, but that he was victorious over the Romans, and the Temple, *and the paradigm*, the paradigm that the leader calls the tune and collects the tolls. Jesus was right, they were not yet what they would become, but that what they would become would change the world. Servants would lead. Pigs would fly.

But Paul is right, too – this paradigm that might makes right is still among us, always ready at a moment's notice to reassert itself, a cosmic evil of this present darkness. Our ransom is paid but we are not yet completely free of the old ways of thinking, we are still enslaved to a paradigm that we think works to our advantage even when it doesn't. How do you fight a paradigm? By exposing it, the way Miss Kathy is doing in the In Crowd Sunday School, the way we are doing today. And by living to a different paradigm in which leaders serve, in which we give of our time and treasure to the things we know are good and helpful and right, in which we put aside our selfishness and self-centeredness to build the Kingdom of God.

Amen.