

**September 26, 2021 | Journey Worship Service**

**TEXT: [Mark 10:35–45](#)**

**TITLE: Inside-Out Faith/Baptism Resolutions**

*By the Rev. Dr. Randy Bush*

I saw a humorous poster once that I've always loved. It said this: *Every so often my mother puts on her wedding dress. She's not feeling nostalgic; she just gets really far behind in the laundry.* Laundry is one of those unexciting household chores that can't be avoided, not if you want to wear fresh clothes and clean underwear on a daily basis. Doing the laundry is an egalitarian chore—men, women, elderly and young alike can figure out how to separate light from dark clothes, put soap in a machine, close the lid and wash a load. When it finishes, you then put the damp clothes in a dryer to complete the process. Pretty straightforward all in all.

Yet there is something miraculous in washing and drying our clothes. How is it possible that so many things end up turned inside-out when I pull them from the dryer? What strange law of physics inverts t-shirts, socks, and long-sleeved shirts? How come half of my time folding the clothes coming out of the dryer is spent reversing them from their inside-out condition? Hmmm, I think there's a sermon in that question. But first, let's look at the story of James and John.

By almost every standard imaginable, James and John made an ill-timed and inappropriate request of Jesus. Jesus had just told them for the third time that they were headed to Jerusalem where he would be handed over to the authorities, condemned, mocked, and killed, and on the third day he would rise again. Right after that, while they were walking down the dusty road together, James and John sidled up to Jesus to ask for a favor. They said, "Teacher, when you are glorified—when you are in power—let us sit on either side of you as your second in command."

When the other disciples realize what James and John have asked, they get angry at what they perceive as a disloyal power grab. The sons of Zebedee may have known Jesus longer than just about all the other disciples, but that doesn't give them the right to request positions of power and a status higher than the others. Pretty soon all the disciples are at odds with one another. Even as Jesus has been telling more and more about the nature of what it means to follow him, his disciples seem to comprehend less and less about what it's really about.

If you're fond of alliteration, James and John were asking for three things from Jesus: proximity, preeminence, and power. They asked to be on thrones in close proximity to Jesus. They had long been part of Jesus' inner circle. They and Peter were the only disciples accompanying Jesus when he was transfigured on the mountaintop, and later they would be the ones with Peter to stay with Jesus when he prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane. Yet it is one thing to be invited to be close to someone of importance, and another thing to put your name card next to the guest of honor at a banquet in the Kingdom of God.

Second, the brothers were seeking preeminence over the other disciples. They felt entitled to ask to be on thrones at Jesus' right and left hand. However, over and over again Jesus had told them that in his realm, the first shall be last and the last shall be first. Evidently not all of that message had sunk in.

Third, James and John wanted power. Now on some level all of us have power. Our American passport confers on us a certain power and global identity. Having a car, having a job, having income are all tools that provide a degree of independence and authority as we navigate daily life. But there's a difference between having power that leads to opportunities and choices versus a power that impacts, even oppresses others. That second version is a "power over" others—the ability to require, even coerce, others to do what you want them to do. The alternative is a "power with"—an ability to act with others to accomplish shared goals.

Are we "power with" or "power over" people? Well, sometimes we are in both categories. Even when we try to be inclusive and fair and just, there remain many settings in which our gender, our race, our sexual identity, our nationality allow us to use laws and social norms so that we have power over others. As a white, cis gender, American male, there is much power that comes to me through injustices built into this historical time and place where I find myself. I name that and regret that dynamic.

Part of being a follower of Christ is the awareness that Jesus calls us to roles of "power with" not "power over." Power with is modeled when we serve beside one another, when others' voices and experiences are valued, when others write the rules and run the meetings. Power with is coming together around a baptism font—young or old, whatever our status in life—and receive there a new identity as a child of God. Power with is to receive communion or serve communion, united in our common unworthiness and a common redemption won for us in Christ.

It is easy to be judgmental of James and John, with their request seeking proximity, preeminence, and power. But when John Calvin wrote some remarks about this passage, he cut the brothers some slack. It's true that James and John may have been slow learners about the true nature of Jesus' realm, but there's no denying that they were loyal followers of Christ. Their faith may have been imperfect, but it was steadfast. They didn't hesitate to follow him down that road that was leading to inevitable confrontation in Jerusalem. In addition, they anticipated a glorious realm to emerge with Christ as the Messiah, even though no hint of it had yet appeared. They believed something God-blessed was coming and part of their awkward request was just their desire to be "in the room where it all was going to happen" (to paraphrase the gospel of "Hamilton").

Having said that, it remains true that James and John were off-base in their request. Years ago, a CBS reporter was interviewing people in Rome about what they would do if they were pope. One young Catholic girl replied, "I'd cover the communion wafers with chocolate." As initially tasty as that may sound, think about the error in that image. A communion wafer dipped in chocolate. The symbol for the crucified body of Christ

sweetened to make it easier to swallow. Sweet tooth Christianity. Easter without Good Friday. Disciples seeking thrones of glory instead of accepting callings of humble servanthood.

When James and John made their request, Jesus didn't rebuke them. Now this is where our earlier conversation about laundry comes back into play. In so many ways, the garments of righteousness being worn by James and John were inside-out in relation to how Jesus would have them clothed. They might have looked alright according to the world's standards. They'd been washed and were clean. They wore garments shaped by the cultural fashion of "power over"—the shirts and pants you'd wear if you want to sidle up to someone to ask for a promotion, for more money, for a raise, a throne on the right hand of the boss. It reflected the fashion of Rome and Jerusalem—or in today's terms, the fashion of Washington, Hollywood, penthouse suites, billionaires' clubs. It is the fashion that says "might makes right," "money is power," and "comfort is king."

But at that moment Jesus looked at them like children who had put their school clothes on inside out and gently corrected them. "You don't know what you're asking." Your logic, like your clothes, is inside-out and topsy-turvy. Instead of thrones and power, let's talk about cups and baptism. He asked, "Can you drink the same cup I will drink?" Remember Jesus wasn't wealthy. He'd mostly drunk from common cups, perhaps of wood or clay. He'd been given water from a ladle on a hot day by a Samaritan woman he met at a well. He'd had a few meals at the homes of wealthy hosts, but mostly he'd cupped his hands and drank from streams and freshwater pools in Galilee. He'd been dusty and tired; he'd been rejected and mocked; he'd had crowds exhaust him with their demands. And soon he would share a final cup with friends who would flee, deny, or betray him—a cup of suffering he prayed might pass from him, but from which he resolved to drink no matter what.

And James—well, James himself would become the first Christian martyr. So yes, Jesus knew James would drink from the same cup as him. He would not sit on a throne, but he would drink from Christ's cup and his faithfulness would be an example for centuries to come.

Then Jesus spoke about baptism. They'd seen the baptizing done by John the Baptist—the splashing in the river Jordan, a dunking beneath the waters, a symbolic drowning, followed by a reemergence into the light. Baptism is meant to be something risky and dramatic. The apostle Paul wrote to the church in Rome and said, *Don't you know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We have been buried with him by baptism into death so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by God's glory, so we too might walk in newness of life*" (Romans 6:4).

In his reply to the fishermen brothers, Jesus turned their garments of righteousness from wrong-side out to right-side out. He reminded them that if you want to be great, you must be a servant of all. The first will be last and the last first. The way of faith is not something to be sugar-coated or chocolate-dipped. It is a downward mobility, a choice not to fight for the top but to help others up from the bottom. And we do it—we drink that

cup, we are baptized in deep waters—because it joins us to Christ and by grace allows us to finally walk in newness of life. Finally we wear our clothes right-side out.

James and John kept following Christ. Where else could they go—for they knew that Jesus offered the words of eternal life. The same is true of us. We drink the cup; we are washed by baptism; by grace our tattered garments of worldly fashion choices are washed, dried, and turned right-side out at last. For all this and so much more—Thanks be to God!

AMEN