

Sermon
21 Pentecost—Proper 21-B-2
St. Andrew's, Methuen
October 17, 2021
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Isaiah 53:4-12
Psalm 91:9-16
Hebrews 5:1-10
Mark 10:35-45

We don't usually think of Jesus being playful, but there he is in Mark 3:17 giving nicknames to three of his disciples. He nicknames Simon 'Rocky'—which is what Peter means in Greek.

And he nicknames James and John the "**Sons of Thunder.**" Scholars aren't at all clear that means, but it seems to me to have a double meaning: One is that they are, or will be, strong leaders. The other is that they are loud and boisterous and thus unaware of what's really going on.

Now in our Gospel reading James and John prove the nickname when they ask Jesus to give them the seats next to him when he comes into his glory.

You may have known some "sons of thunder" back in high school or college. These are the people who think rules don't apply to them—they have no shame in cutting in front of the line in traffic or at the movies.

Stephen Chapman saw them at Duke Divinity School where he taught in 2006. Instead of 'sons of thunder' he calls them the 'sons of entitlement'. He writes, "They are usually—but not always—**young and white in addition to being male.** They patronize second-career students, female students, minority students and those ministerial students who are without apparent academic ambitions."

He writes that, "Not too long ago, a student asked me during a final exam if he could write an essay on a topic of his own choosing rather than on one of the three possibilities provided by the test. When I explained that such latitude would be unfair to everyone else in the course, he replied softly, '**No one has to know.**' On another occasion he expressed interest in becoming a bishop. I bet he makes it." Christian Century, October 17, 2006, page 20

These 'sons of entitlement' carrying a deep sense of privilege that raises them above everyone else. What is an accident of birth, becomes for them something they've earned—like some of my white friends who argued against affirmative action for minorities, yet who never complained when their fathers would make calls to find them a job or get them into a school. They had no problem with 'White People Affirmative Action'.

I knew these sons of entitlement in seminary 45 years ago because I was one. I remember making fun of the sad looking, burned-out older clergy who came for six weeks of continuing education. My friends and I called them re-treads, and we were embarrassed by them.

Certainly, when we'd been in the ministry for 30 years we would shine with glory—in a very humble sort of way, of course.

James and John want to be archbishops in Jesus's all-powerful kingdom. The other ten, however, rise up in anger against the sons of thunder. They too are caught in the mindset that being an archbishop is better than being the woman who cleans the church.

But notice that Jesus responds to James and John without judgment. He doesn't turn them down completely. Rather he asks if they are able to share his baptism and drink his cup.

Then he tells them he is not creating another domination system to replace the domination system of culture and empire, **but he is birthing an egalitarian community in which the great are the servants and the first are in the back of the line with the slaves.**

Instead of kings on the mountain, Jesus tells them to be servants in the valley, in order to share his life-giving communion with the Living God.

You and I have also been formed by our culture to accept the hierarchies in which men are above women, white skin is better than black and brown skin, straight is better than gay and trans; and wealthy is better than middle class.

Conventional wisdom tells us that happiness is found by fitting into the system; climbing the ladder of success as high as you can; and by keeping those who are different from getting on the ladder at all.

But this is not the vision Jesus proclaims. He says even the Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life to free those held hostage by the systems of domination.

Beloved, we must see how Jesus challenges us, not only to let go of our quest for status, wealth, and power over others, **but also to deconstruct our political and religious systems that operate these hierarchies.**

On the road to Damascus Apostle Paul receives not only a vision of the Risen Christ, but also **Christ's vision of another way of being human.** This is so shattering that Paul retreats for three years into Arabia and then spends another 7 years at home in Tarsus deconstructing what he had always thought to be true, in order to integrate the Vision of the New Humanity in Christ.

This is the vision we read about in Paul's letter to the Galatians, which some scholars now think predates even Paul and was spoken over the newly baptized as they are lifted out of the water:

Paul writes: "As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. ²⁸ There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus." Galatians 3:27-28

This is the vision Jesus wants the Sons of Thunder and the other disciples to catch, for it is the vision of how things really are. **The systems of hierarchy and domination are not God-made, but manmade—to** protect the privilege of my life. As we are clothed with Christ, we let go of all the labels and descriptions by which we used to define ourselves over against others.

Luke says Jesus first heard about this vision from the song his mother Mary sings:

"God has shown strength with his arm;
 he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.
 God has brought down the powerful from their thrones,
 and lifted up the lowly;
 God has filled the hungry with good things,
 and sent the rich empty away."

Following Jesus is a revolutionary way of being human in the world. 2000 years later we have barely caught a glimpse of what it might mean to live the vision that "there is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus."

By the way: As it turns out, the 'Sons of Thunder' do not get to be next to Jesus in his glory. That honor goes to the two who are crucified with him.