

The Cost of Blind Ambition
Psalm 104:1-9, 24, 35c; Mark 10:32-45

October 21, 2018

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Any of you listen to podcasts? I'm a little late coming to podcasts, but I've really enjoyed listening to them over the last year or so. One of my favorites is *Historical Figures*. It is an audio biography of historical figures. Wednesday as I drove home from Atlanta I listened to one on Joseph Stalin. We think of Adolph Hitler as the worst monster of that era, killing 8 million Jews during the Holocaust. Historians believe that Stalin, either directly or indirectly, was responsible for the deaths of between 20-40 million people. It's mind-boggling.

Historical figures can be categorized in many ways. I place them into one of two categories. The first category contains people like Jackie Robinson, Helen Keller, the Wright brothers, Nelson Mandela, and Nikola Tesla. These people were motivated by healthy ambition. Ambition inspired them to make a great contribution to the world. Ambition helped Jackie Robinson overcome the strident racism of the 1940s to become the first black man to play in Major League Baseball. It helped Orville and Wilbur Wright prove most of the world wrong. By observing birds in flight, they became convinced that something as large and heavy as an airplane actually could fly. Mandela languished in prison for 27 years. Driven by his belief in the goodness and equality of all people, he endured, was elected President of South Africa, dismantled apartheid, and was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize.

Healthy ambition. That's one category.

The other category contains people like Stalin, Genghis Khan, Jesse James, and Jimmy Hoffa. In these people, ambition took dark turn. It didn't just inspire them to do their best and overcome obstacles. Their ambition blinded them to the harm they was doing. Healthy ambition morphed into blind ambition and led to deception, corruption, and murder. Blind ambition is an overwhelming drive to advance one's on interests. Blind ambition cheats, if that's what it takes. It steps on others when it has to. Blind ambition is a drive to win no matter the cost. That's the other category.

Some suggest we see a touch of blind ambition in the sons of Zebedee, James and John, in our text from Mark 10. This incident with James and John follows what theologians call the third Passion prediction. Three times in the Gospel of Mark Jesus told his disciples about his Passion, that he would suffer and die and on the third day rise from the dead. The disciples didn't understand. We probably wouldn't have either. After the first Passion prediction, Peter actually rebuked Jesus: "Don't say that, Jesus! We won't let that happen to you!" Remember what Jesus did? Jesus rebuked Peter, calling him Satan and telling him to get out of the way. The second time Jesus gave them an object lesson. They still didn't understand what Jesus meant, so he took a child and placed the child before the disciples. He told them that if they wanted to be first, they had to be last and servant of all, much like that child was last and servant of all. Here for the third and final time Jesus told them the same thing. They will go to Jerusalem, he said. He will be handed over to the religious leaders, who will condemn him to death. He will be mocked, spit upon and flogged. Then they will kill him. And after three days, he will rise again.

Apparently the disciples, at least two of them, still didn't understand what Jesus meant. Or is this possible? Maybe they did understand, at least James and John, and they wanted to move Jesus in a different direction, a direction that better suited their ambition. Blind ambition will do that. It will take something good and noble and alter it so that it is no longer so good and noble. James and John approached Jesus and made what some consider to be a childish, open-ended demand. "Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you," they said.

Whatever we ask of you? What kind of request is that? Who would agree to that? And who would dare make such an open-ended request, other than a child? Or someone driven by blind ambition?

Jesus, of course, did not agree to their demand. Instead he asked, "What is it you want me to do for you?"

Here it is. This is what James and John really wanted: "Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory."

Now, what exactly were James and John asking for? This is critical to this text. They wanted to sit on Jesus' right and left hands in his glory. What

would that have looked like? Most agree that James and John were hoping for temporal power, an earthly kingdom where Jesus would be king and they would be high officials. They were asking for thrones of authority, one on the right and one on the left of the king. One person suggests that it was comparable to asking to be the Secretary of State and the Secretary of Defense in the U.S. President's cabinet (H. Turlington, *BBC*, p.352). Jesus was trying to teach them about the Kingdom of God, ultimate truths, of how God wanted to relate to them and of how they were to relate to each other. But their ambition was for something different. They wanted temporal power. Let's go to Jerusalem. That's okay. Let's interact with all the officials. That's good. But let's forget the part about being mocked, spit upon, that part about being flogged, and especially that part about being killed.

Jesus then asked them if they were able to drink from the cup that he would drink from or receive the baptism he would receive. Of course, these are metaphors, referring to Jesus' Passion. Remember when he said, "Let this *cup* pass from me?" His cup was suffering. His baptism was death.

When the other disciples learned of what James and John had done, they were rightly indignant. James and John were trying to get ahead of them. They were no longer a team of equals. James and John, driven by blind ambition, were cheating, going behind their backs, trying to get plum positions of authority. So Jesus used this occasion to hammer home one more time the central truth of his life:

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.

Jesus had ambition, but it never blinded him to his central mission. James and John had ambition too, but they became blinded by the lure of earthly power. Every indicator suggests that, even after three explanations, they would have abandoned the central mission of Jesus for the brief thrill of a bit of earthly power, and they would have paid the cost of blind ambition. But thankfully Jesus would not waver. If you want to be great, he insisted, you must be a servant. If you wish to be first, you must be slave of all. And then he reminded them that even he did not come to be served but to serve. Ultimately he came to give his life. Ironically, Jesus did have a throne, with

one on his right and another on his left. His throne was a cross, and thieves flanked him on either side. There he gave his life as a ransom for many. There, in the act of ultimate servanthood, we see the world's greatest power.

Mahatma Gandhi was a historical figure who understood this. He once said, "The day the power of love overrules the love of power, the world will know peace."

Martin Luther King, Jr., understood: "If physical death is the price that I must pay to free my white brothers and sisters from a permanent death of spirit, then nothing can be more redemptive."

Many have understood that the greatest among us are servants and that the first among us are slaves of all. The gospel calls us to a life of service. In that life of service we tap into the power Jesus demonstrated in his Passion. He was handed over and condemned. They mocked him, spit upon him and flogged him. They killed him, and after three days, he rose again. That power has changed the world, and that is the power we tap into every time we serve.

So I read this text as both a calling and a warning. As we sidle up next to presidents and kings and other powerful figures, let us be warned that we are taking the way of the sons of Zebadee, James and John, and there is a cost to pay for that blind ambition. This text calls us instead to sidle up next to those who need our love, compassion, and service. There we will find the power of the gospel.

Closing Prayer

We are willing, Lord, to drink from the cup you drink from and receive the baptism you receive. Help us to be faithful to the end. Amen.