

I love the apostles. They give me such encouragement. Whenever I get down on myself, I just think of them and remember how clueless they were and I don't feel so bad about whatever foolish thing I've done. Today, Jesus has just explained that He must go to Jerusalem and die a most shameful and painful death, and the next moment James and John are asking to be given special preference above their fellow apostles. James and John are brothers and, along with Peter, are mentioned many times as part of the closest friends of Jesus, who are brought to the mountain top to see his Transfiguration, taken into the inner room of the synagogue official to witness Jesus restoring a little girl back to life, go into Gethsemane with Jesus to support him in His interior agony (where of course they fall asleep), and on and on.

In one scene Jesus is passing through a Samaritan town, and no one will receive him or offer him hospitality. These same two brothers James and John, called the "Sons of Boanerges," which mean "Sons of Thunder," ask Jesus, "Do you want us to call down fire from heaven on this town?" Not much thunder in them in today's gospel as their mommy practically takes them by the hand to ask Jesus this outrageous favor. The other apostles are not better. They become indignant at the request

of Mother Boanerges, and they all start to argue. Peter, of course is the very worst. There are too many stories of Peter making foolish mistakes to recall today. Yes, whenever you get down on yourself, remember how foolish, selfish and clueless were the apostles, **yet**, chosen by Jesus and formed by the Spirit into the pillars of the Church.

From another perspective, the request by the mother of James and John is not surprising. They are her sons, her family. Of course, she would want the best for them, want them to get ahead, have the best positions. She probably loves them very much. At least she wants them to be as successful as possible. Wouldn't any mother or father want the same for their children? But for us Christians hearing this gospel, it's immediately clear that it's not right. It's just not right.

If you were asked to identify yourself, to capture your full identity as much as possible, but only use five words, what would they be? I remember this exercise was a task in a career guidance workshop. Just five words to express as best you can who you are. Let me try: Weiler, man, Jesuit, Catholic, American. [I have to include "Catholic" with Jesuit because some people think we're Lutherans.]. There, try it yourself.

This exercise helps us understand a little what is happening in the underlying conflict of today's gospel. The James and John's mother is doing something very natural. She loves her sons, wants the best for them. Of course. They are family, and family is her first and most important commitment. She is loyal to her family. The other apostles might be nice guys, but they are not family. She's got to get what's best for her children, even at the expense of others.

This is the way the world works. You take care of your own, whether that means your family, your clan, your tribe, members of your Church, your countrymen, whatever group holds your loyalty. But all such loyalties are also divisions. These loyalties and divisions weave their way through and through our lives: Americans/Russians, Irish/English, Black/White, Muslim/Christian, family/outside, friends/enemies, male/female, Seahawks/49ers... Some are comforting, some are playful, and some are deadly. The mother of James and John was simply asserting her loyalty to family.

Jesus has a big job ahead of him, and He's not done yet. He has to prepare us for heaven. That's our ultimate

destination, of course. *In my Father's house there are many dwelling places.* We will all meet again in the Father's house of many rooms. But there the most important identity will simply be **Child of God**. None of the other loyalties will be as important. That's not to say that there is anything wrong with those loyalties. But all those descriptions of self, all those definitions of identity, must yield before the first and final identity: Child of God. Being children of God, we are all bound together in one family.

Jesus is teaching us a different way of thinking about ourselves and a different way of loving. Saint Paul caught it when he wrote:

"All of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free person, there is not male and female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus." Heaven is going to be different. It might take a little getting used to. We had better start to get used to it by practicing a little now.

Jesus is also teaching us a different way to love. Even a different way to love oneself. The mother of James and John thinks that she is doing her best for her sons, pushing them

forward, getting the best positions for them. Jesus proposes just the opposite, that the height of human accomplishment—being the first, the greatest—is to act as the servant and slave of all. The best position is the lowliest one.

What is the measure of a human life? If you were to read an obituary from the paper, it might seem that the most accomplished human life is someone who had a large family, great possessions and wealth, many honors, and great achievements. Jesus turns all that upside down. His teaching and the example of His life is that the height of human achievement is to empty oneself by giving all in love. Again, Saint Paul describes this well:

*Though He was in the form of God,
He did not regard equality with God something to be grasped at
Rather, he emptied Himself,
taking the form of a slave,
coming in human likeness.
and found human in appearance, He humbled Himself further,
becoming obedient to death, even death on a cross.*

The lesson of the Jesus' death is not that He died a gruesome, horrible death—it was a terrible death, but the Romans crucified

lots of people—No, the lesson of Jesus' death is that He held nothing back. His gift of Himself was total. In love, He emptied Himself out: love for the children of God; love for His sisters and brothers; love for those with whom He plans to spend all eternity.

Whoever wishes to be great among you shall be your servant; whoever wishes to be first among you shall be your slave. Just so, the Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many.