

“Are We Able?”

Mark 10:35-45

The Twenty-Second Sunday after Pentecost

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Rev. Anita Peebles, Seattle First Baptist Church

Last week, after attending the Evergreen Annual Meeting hosted by First Baptist Church of Salt Lake City, I traveled to southern Utah with some friends to explore Bryce Canyon and Zion National Parks. I love visiting National Parks, in part because I hold dear to the idea that nature’s beauty and wilderness must be conserved and accessible to all people, and in part because I am a bit of an environmental science nerd. Geology rocks...get it?

But really, exploring the geological formations in the Parks was incredible! Hiking among the famous hoodoos of Bryce Canyon, I marveled at how the high elevation in the canyon allowed for frost wedging to do its slow millimeter-by-millimeter work of carving holes and crevices and shaping ancient rocks. And in Zion, I was awe-filled as I hiked along the banks of the Virgin River, which over millions of years carved one of the most incredible geological formations I’ve ever seen, exposing the most gorgeous iron-rich Navajo Sandstone in the world. The power of water was all around us in the desert—does that sound like an oxymoron to you? It’s not! Water formed the landscape, with the silt from ancient riverbeds condensing into rock. And then it carved that same rock over eons into intricate shapes and wonder-inspiring figures. Water gives life in the desert, creating verdant riparian areas along creek beds. Water takes away life, as we were reminded by signs warning of flash flooding in slot canyons. Power was all around me, even as I propelled myself with my own power up and down hikes along precarious paths and scrambling over rocks.

And as I hiked in the power-filled landscape, I thought of our scripture from Job. One of my favorite things about preaching is reading the text ahead of time and “living with” the scripture for a while before sitting down to formulate my thoughts into a written sermon. And the grandeur of Creation, shaped by the power of the Holy, was in my mind in Bryce and Zion.

In the interchange with the downtrodden Job, a faithful servant of God who was the object of spiritual testing that resulted in him losing almost everything that gave his life meaning, God responds to Job’s rightful anger and confusion and pain with an expression of God’s own power. Who was great enough to command the power of Creation, to shape the mountains and the canyons, to bring life to the smallest insect and the greatest predator, to determine the course of celestial bodies? I like to think sometimes that God was not reprimanding Job for being angry with God, but that God was refocusing Job away from his own suffering towards a larger perspective of life that showed God was in and through and with everything in all Creation.

And then in the gospel text for today, we see that Jesus takes a leaf out of God’s book, and has to refocus the disciples as they deal with their own complex relationship with power. Dare I say, Jesus has to help the disciples reorganize their priorities *again*?! Like the text I preached on

several weeks ago from earlier in Mark's gospel, power and status are again on the disciples' minds, this time James and John, the sons of Zebedee.

James and John had come a long way from the lakeshore. We first meet the brothers as humble fishermen in Mark 3, working for their father Zebedee...we assume that after they dropped their nets they followed Jesus and were paying attention to his teaching and preaching, helped him in his ministry, and perhaps, like the other disciples, experienced some confusion at times regarding what Jesus was ultimately up to. Perhaps they became frustrated with the itinerant lifestyle, yearning for a stable home and family and an income and security. So perhaps we ought not to be surprised that this passage sees them wanting more...and not just a little, a LOT.

Let's be honest, it's always a little fishy when someone comes to you and says, "I want you to do something for me, but before I tell you what it is, you have to promise to do it." Color me skeptical. But Jesus hears them out, and finds that their priorities were misaligned at worst, and confused at best.

James and John were focused on power, on status, wanting to sit in the privileged places of Jesus' right and left hand when the tedious work of daily ministry was over and it was time for glory. Even when Jesus explained for the Nth time that his ministry was threatened and that true disciples would have to follow in his footsteps, James and John, focused on achieving their goal, agreed that they were able to follow rightly.

Luther Seminary professor Matt Skinner writes,

"Although James and John affirm their willingness to endure suffering with Jesus, he waits until later to explain that they will fail to do so in the immediate future (14:26-50). Instead, in 10:41-45, he addresses their desire for power and prestige. He comments on the nature of human power—the kind of power that will soon crush him in the political spectacle of his trial and execution—and on the meaning of his death. He puts his life and death, along with the lives and sufferings of his followers, in complete opposition to such expressions of power."¹

In James' and John's words, there was something of provocation in their conversation with Jesus, provoking Jesus to give them a desirable answer in line with their understanding of greatness. And when he didn't respond how they hoped, they found that they had provoked the other disciples to anger at their quest for power.

In our scriptures today, we find meditations on the power of God, the power of humanity, and the power of Jesus. Of course, power takes many forms. Defined as the ability to influence, power can be given, shared, taken away, hoarded, and obsessed over. Every day we live within a power structure built along lines of race, ethnicity, color, language, economic bracket, academic achievement, beauty, wealth, and more. Power shows up in the titles we give to one another: President, Judge, Senator, Officer, Doctor, Reverend. Power in our modern, late-stage capitalist

¹ <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-29-2/commentary-on-mark-1035-45-2>

US American society is often a “power-over” kind of influence, rather than a “power-with.” “Power-over” is the kind of power that exerts control, hoards knowledge, polices behavior, capitalizes on weakness...and it is driven by fear. “Power-with” is characterized by collaboration, collective flourishing, problem-solving together, accountability, solidarity...it is driven by a deep love and desire for equity.

Job and James and John, and may I admit, we, are often confused about power. We don’t know whether the power we want or need or have or relinquish is the right kind of power that will serve our goals. But the Holy reverses our idea of power: greatness does not come from power-over, it is about power-with and power-shared. The greatest are those whose power rests in their humility, in their service. Jesus reminds the disciples, disgruntled at their companions as they may be, that true greatness is accorded to those who are able to follow in Jesus’ footsteps, suffer with him, be in solidarity with him, which is, necessarily, solidarity with the poor and the outcast.

Liberation theologians such as Gustavo Gutierrez, Leonardo Boff and others all contended that God has a preferential option for the poor, those who were outcast and downtrodden by the structures of domination of their day. They called out those who too closely aligned with the influential and the wealthy, who covered up the schemes of the powerful, who supported the exploitation of widows, children, survivors of war, and those living in poverty. Solidarity with the poor was what Jesus was about, and what Christians should be about, too.

But it wasn’t a bland solidarity, or an easy one, or one without risk. In *A Theology of Liberation*, Gutierrez wrote, “Love of Enemies’ does not ease tensions; rather it challenges the whole system and becomes a subversive formula. Universal love comes down from the level of abstractions and becomes concrete and effective by becoming incarnate in the struggle for the liberation of the oppressed.”

Jesus’ response to James and John’s provocative request was to tell them the truth about what they were up against. Were they ready to do the work? In order to follow him, they’d already given up their livelihoods, but were they ready to relinquish perhaps even their lives? Solidarity with the oppressed, radical solidarity as Jesus lived it, required struggle: were they able to wholeheartedly say yes to that path?

Notable abolitionist and speaker Frederick Douglass said, “Those who profess to favor freedom and depreciate agitation, are people who want crop without ploughing the ground; they want rain without thunder and lightning; they want the ocean without the roar of its many waters. The struggle may be a moral one, or it may be a physical one, or it may be both. But it must be a struggle. Power concedes nothing without a demand. It never did and it never will.”

The same question posed to James and John is turned to us today: are we able to follow in the Way of Jesus? Are we able to risk something big for something good? Are we able to struggle for the liberation for all people? Are we able to provoke one another to good deeds instead of to empty striving for domination, influence, title, status?

The theme of the Evergreen Annual Meeting last weekend was from the book of Hebrews, “provoking one another to good deeds.” In her Saturday night sermon, Rev. Dr. Lauren Ng preached that there is so much “unholy provocation” in the world, provocation to lust for power, to control, to defensiveness, to violence. She said this “unholy provocation” is “modern-day blood sport, it’s our culture’s currency.”

We see this today. We only have to look to the federal election cycle. Provocation is everywhere, in flags flown and television ads and social media comment wars. People are using provocation as a weapon, a tool to elevate their status over someone else, to be more-right, more-good, more-more-more than others. This proclivity to positioning oneself above others, like James and John’s request of Jesus, must be re-prioritized.

With our Evergreen Association meeting in mind, I wonder if we might think of Jesus’ reprimanding of the disciples like this: are we able to use our power to provoke one another to good deeds? Use it for creativity and art and community and solidarity in the service of liberation? Are we able to follow the way of Jesus, the way that is risky and rewarding, the way of selfless service and solidarity? Are we able to carve a place for ourselves in the world, a place for our values and the flourishing of all, in the midst of so much lust for power, so much unholy provocation?

In the famous sci-fi novel *Ender’s Game*, Orson Scott Card writes, “There are times when the world is rearranging itself, and at times like that, the right words can change the world.”

Job and James and John found themselves at those points in time. And I think we are at one of those times now.

So I think we can say “yes, we are able,” provided that we say “yes” together. I think we can seek and use the power that is power-with, the power intrinsic in solidarity and collective flourishing. I think we can use power to give life, to be creative, like the power of water in Zion Canyon, making space, uplifting, crafting, shaping our beautiful and wild life together.

Knowing that the last shall be first, that the ones who serve are the greatest, that even the smallest grain of sand is part of a stunning canyon-scape, I call on each of us to get to know our power. Find and fill the place that only we can around the great table. Ask our questions and allow the Holy to redirect us to the priorities that lead us toward liberation for all. And together, we will hear the voice of Jesus say: Are you able?

And together, we can answer in a resounding tone of love: Yes, we are able.