

“When Tyrants Don’t Win”

Rev. David Gregory

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Pentecost 22



Jesus Washing the Feet of his Disciples
Albert Edelfelt

Readings

Martin Luther King, Jr.

in a sermon entitled “Drum Major Instinct,” February 4, 1968

If you want to be important—wonderful. If you want to be recognized—wonderful. If you want to be great—wonderful. But recognize that he who is greatest among you shall be your servant. That's a new definition of greatness. By giving that definition of greatness, it means that everybody can be great, because everybody can serve. You don't have to have a college degree to serve. You don't have to make your subject and your verb agree to serve. You don't have to know about Plato and Aristotle to serve. You don't have to know Einstein's theory of relativity to serve. You don't have to know the second theory of thermodynamics in physics to serve. You only need a heart full of grace, a soul generated by love. And you can be that servant.

Mark 10:42-43

from the New Revised Standard Version

You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant.

I've chosen to begin with today's gospel reading from the tenth chapter of Mark. In addition to being the earliest of the four gospels, Mark is the shortest, the fastest moving, and most succinct of the four portraits included in the New Testament. Most of the scholarship identifies Mark as John Mark, a relative of Barnabas, and a protégé of the Apostle Paul with whom he had a bit of a rocky relationship. But that is a different sermon for a different day. What's important for us this morning is that Mark's gospel is a more rudimentary and less complex view of Jesus than, say, that of the wordier, more educated, more nuanced work of Luke the Physician.

Mark's gospel has less of a story line, and reads more like a travelogue: this happened, then this happened; he said this, then he said that, and then the next thing happened. And today's story comes from one of these brief episodes, where we are told that two of the disciples, James and John, both sons of a fisherman named Zebedee, came to Jesus and asked if they could be the ones to sit next to him in this new messianic kingdom that everyone had pinned their hopes on. After all, they were among the first four people to start following Jesus around the countryside, and not only were they in this early inner circle, they had actually dropped everything, leaving their father's business to do so. They had invested everything, and perhaps they wanted to gain some sense that what they were doing was worthwhile. "So, Jesus, how about making us the two most important people in your royal court? We just thought we'd get our request in early in case you were starting to think about your most important cabinet appointments." You get the idea. Jesus's answer to their question draws a stark contrast with the more shallow, ego-driven concerns that seemed to consume James and John. He said to them simply, "You do not know what you are asking."

Love of power is nothing new. History is replete with patriarchal power plays, ladder-climbing at the expense of others, and at times, outright tyranny. I'm being far too rough on these two fishermen. Like most Jewish peasants, they had spent their lives in hard labor, scratching out a living, and feeling pretty powerless where their future was concerned. Then along comes this young, wonder-working rabbi who speaks with such profundity and wisdom that they simply had to drop what they were doing and go along with him, and like most of us, they wanted some assurance that they had made the right choice.

When the other ten disciples heard about what was going on, they got really angry at the two brothers. "Who do they think they are? Have they learned nothing at all? What makes them think that they are special?" I can imagine that the air was pretty hot with conflict, so Jesus takes them all aside and says, "Listen up, gang." Or words to that effect. The gospel account says it this way:

You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant.

To the post-modern American mind, this is of course, completely counterintuitive. Just ask around on Capitol Hill these days. We live in a time when the raw, unadulterated, shameless quest for power has become the single guiding principle. Some within our highest leadership make no apology at all for the fact that their number one priority is not governing, but gaining and maintaining power. Those who are powerful leaders are the ones who "lord it over" others, and who exercise tyranny instead of justice. Jesus said, "It is not so among you."

What we must remember is that our current moral, cultural, and political challenges are not unique to our times. More than half a century ago, Martin Luther King, just a couple of months before his murder, stood in the pulpit of the Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta—a pulpit vacated earlier this year by the Reverend Raphael Warnock since his election to the U.S. Senate from the state of Georgia—and Dr. King preached a sermon on this very text from Mark's gospel. I can only repeat his words:

If you want to be important—wonderful. If you want to be recognized—wonderful. If you want to be great—wonderful. But recognize that he who is greatest among you shall be your servant. That's a new definition of greatness. By giving that definition of greatness, it means that everybody can be great, because everybody can serve. You don't have to have a college degree to serve. You don't have to make your subject and your verb agree to serve. You don't have to know about Plato and Aristotle to serve. You don't have to know Einstein's theory of relativity to serve. You don't have to know the second theory of thermodynamics in physics to serve. You only need a heart full of grace, a soul generated by love. And you can be that servant.

We all know what happened to Dr. King a couple of months later. And we all know what happened to Bobby Kennedy a couple of months after that. And most of us here can easily remember the violence that had gripped our cities in the four and a half years between the first Kennedy assassination and the second one. The tide began to shift as civil rights, voting rights, and social programs like Medicare and Head Start began to address the inequities that these prophetic voices had spent years crying out for. Servant leadership got us moving forward, and tyrannical power pushed back; it always does. It would then stand to reason that we'd just have to push back harder, right? Fight fire with fire, right? Beat them at their own game, right? I mean, if that's how they want to play it What are we supposed to do? Servanthood doesn't get us anywhere. And still, Jesus said, "It is not so among you." I'm telling you today, this is hard stuff. When John Lewis walked across the Edmund Pettis Bridge, he did not come with artillery or weapons of any kind. He and many others simply walked quietly and bravely forward in service to their fellow human beings. And with the brutality of that tyrannical moment broadcast into all our living rooms, that is when the tide began to shift. We can either believe in the love of power or the power of love. This is one of the few binaries that holds up for us. This is one of a handful of dogmas we can bank on. This is not a question to live in; it's one we have to answer.

On the summer solstice in 2011, Tripp and I accompanied our close friends Rev. Lee Ann Bryce and her partner Lisa November to Connecticut, where the four of us gathered on a shoreline near the town of Mystic. It was there that I performed their legal marriage ceremony, because it still could not be recognized in New York. In a matter of days, it did become legal in New York. As many of our friends and acquaintances rushed the courthouses to obtain their marriage licenses, Tripp and I took a pause. There were several reasons for that, but one of them was that we could sense that a pushback was coming.

There are people who fought really hard for our right to marry, and I would never minimize their efforts, or suggest that they were somehow wrong to take to the streets, or even to the Supreme Court as they eventually did. Our activism took the form of another summer solstice three years later in 2014, when we gathered with about fifty people in Rhinebeck, New York, overlooking the Hudson River as Rev. Lee Ann Bryce performed our legal marriage ceremony with her wife Lisa looking on. Almost exactly one year after that, a Supreme Court decision made our marriage license recognized in every state. Our rights seem pretty solid to us most of the time, but we cannot help but notice that the tide is shifting. The pushback is coming. Voting rights used to seem pretty solid too, but have you noticed lately what's happening there? The question is, what are we going to do about all of this? How are we going to meet the tyranny of raw power? What are we going to do about the problems of inhumanity? The answer isn't to do nothing. The answer is to show up ready for service instead of battle. Let us recognize that the model for that service is Jesus in the garden, Martin Luther King in Memphis, John Lewis in Selma. The pendulum will keep swinging back and forth until it meets an immovable object, and that object is called "the servant of all."