

“Practicing Pentecost: After Baptism”

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Mark 10:35-45

“The cup that I drink you will drink, and with the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized,” says Jesus. “But to sit at my right hand or at my left is not mine to grant.” And for emphasis, he says, “Whoever wants to be great must be a servant (table waiter). The first sentence, seemingly about drinking and baptism, is really about raw power. The second, which seems to be about flying first class instead of coach is also about raw power, as is the third statement. Think with me about power. Raw power. I want to suggest that to practice Pentecost, to live in the dynamic flow of Holy Spirit’s presence and power is to understand raw power and to live accordingly.

Scientists tell us that there are mysterious currents invisible to the naked eye: infrared, electromagnetic, terahertz radiation and microwaves. I’m also thinking about the strange waves deep beneath the surface of an ocean that shape the underwater edges of continents. The existence of power is evident in everything that is, in what we have, see, read and feel. Power is mysterious, but no less real; it surges in nature and in us, and it informs and motivates us. The words “powerful” and “powerless” share in common the reality of raw power.

Today’s Gospel reading reminds us that power was at work in the time of Jesus and among his closest followers. I’m not talking about radiation, but relationships that reshape our life together as members of the human family. We can hardly blame James and John for wanting to be so close to power. “Teacher,” they say to Jesus, “We want to sit close to you when you sit in the high place of glory (power?).” It is not clear whether this is selfish ambition or daring faith to go all the way, cost what it may. And Jesus replies with a question that will prepare for yet another lesson: “Are you able to drink the cup that I will drink?” he asks. And the Sons of Zebedee, say, “We are able” in perfect unison.

Barbara Brown Taylor writes of this scene: “They seem to believe that the new world will be set up just like the old world with new leadership in place. The bad guys at the head table will be removed, their chairs fumigated, and God’s new crew will be seated, with Jesus in the number one position, and the most loyal members of his staff on either side of him. Once this change has been accomplished, then – finally! at last! – the good people will commence to redeem the world from the top to bottom, beginning from the top. The ultimate trickle-down effect.” (*Bread of Angels*, pg. 43) I hope that’s not too cynical.

But cynical or not, Jesus tells James and John that the new way for the new realm won’t work that way. The new world, already at work in this present moment, will not be like the old one that will pass away. The new has the power to turn the old upside down. Jesus’ understanding of power fascinates to this very day; it involves quiet, nearly invisible people slipping in and out among the guests at a dinner party, refilling wine glasses and laying down clean silverware for the next course. As Mark has been telling us for a month of Sundays, greatness isn’t about dignitaries and honored guests, not about privilege and better seats. Greatness is discernable mostly in the kitchen by those stirring the soup. As Jesus gained notoriety, because he acted and spoke with such power, the disciples thought that once Jesus took over things that they would be needed in places of power, not in the kitchen. But Jesus had other things on his

mind: Has everyone been served? Is all the food on the table? Does anyone need anything? “I do not want to be served. I want to serve and give my life, like a ransom, for many.” This was not only how he spoke, but how he lived his life after his own baptism! And we know that Jesus wasn’t pretending to be a servant until he could escape into a telephone booth to change into something else. The Jesus we know is a servant through and through, to the core. And the good seats? Well, they are not his to give. He wasn’t in it for reward. He was in it for love, and it will cost him everything.

Brian McLaren, author of several books and one we studied a few years ago *We Make the Road By Walking*, spoke to a conference earlier this month and was reported to have said that the church of tomorrow will not be a simple continuation of the church of the past. Structures and hierarchies will change, because they do. But he suggested that at this time local churches can redeploy their assets and rethink their purpose and become “studios of love in the way of Jesus Christ.” And I guess McLaren suggested at that gathering a course outline for such a studio (laboratory or classroom):

- Love 101, focusing on love of neighbor
- Love 201, loving oneself unselfishly
- Love 301, loving the earth and creation
- Love 401, focusing on God.

What do you think? Could this cycle of love – love of neighbor, self, creation and God – serve as the basis of what we say and do, learn and leverage, here in this studio of love at the corner of 7th and Laurel? It might sound like something new, and if that helps us get on board, well, let’s call it the next cool thing to do. Actually, as Mark will tell us in a couple weeks, establishing “studios of Love” is as old as old can be. Jesus tells his followers in chapter 12 that it is ours simply to love God, with heart, soul, mind, and strength, and to love our neighbors, surely with heart, soul, mind and strength, as we love ourselves, yes, with heart, soul, mind and strength. Is this not a viable outline, schematic or diagram of raw power? Love embedded throughout the universe, love embodied in us, love infused in every relationship?

Reading the obituaries this week reminded me once again that the mortality rate still stands at 100%. Have you thought about that lately? And you may be thinking, so, that’s the fine print – we don’t make it out of here alive; our baptism is a defining moment that will cost us everything? No, that’s not the catch, that’s the blessing. We are followers of the Christ not for a reward or until something better comes along. We are followers through and through, to the core. And it is a blessing that moves us to sing: “Lord we are able. Our spirits are thine. Remold and make us like thee divine. Thy guiding radiance above us shall be, a beacon to God, to love and loyalty.”

(“Are Ye Able,” No. 530 – the hymn sung earlier in the service.)