

Trinity Church in the City of Boston

The Rev. Morgan S. Allen

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Mark 10:35-45, Proper 24 (Year B)

In you, O Lord, have we taken refuge; for the sake of your name, lead us and guide us.¹ *Amen.*

We are sixteen days away.

Other than the 6:30, *NBC Nightly News with Lester Holt* and Pete Bouchard's² weather forecast, I don't watch much television anymore. Instead, my regimen includes a circuit through five or seven websites of traditional media (so-called) and niche, Substack-deep-dives into polling esoterica. Within seconds, I alternate clicking posts to confirm my electoral anxieties and reading other articles to salve my despair. Over and over again, I fit this routine into the crevices of my day: pumping gas; waiting on hold; walking across Boylston – my phone in my hand, Nate Cohn³ and Matthew Yglesias⁴ the first and last faces I see when I wake up and as I fall asleep.

I recognize this scrolling exercise responds to the powerlessness I feel to change an outcome that weighs so heavy and consequential. As I measure the stakes and their impacts most immediate to me – *to us* – I see only a short distance between where we are now, and this very pulpit compelled to partisan conformity. Sensationalist as it sounds, I mean that. I am frightened. I am bewildered. And by implicit or explicit threat, I fear that grim future could come to pass no matter which party wins in November.

The sons of Zebedee approach Jesus: “Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you.”⁵ Jesus – whether caught off-guard by their audacity or giving room for his friends to make their mistake – replies noncommittally and without immediate judgment: “What is it you want me to do for you?”⁶ And the brothers answer: “Appoint us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory.”⁷

My goodness. Among other uglinesses, James' and John's unvarnished desire for power offends our meritocratic inclinations for fairness: they have not built consensus; they have not “earned” leadership with talent or tenure; they *presume* power by entitlement. We join the other disciples' collegial aggravation with them: *I mean, fellas, what are we doing here? Setting aside for a moment that you're contradicting the fundamental spirit of our movement, who on God's great earth do you think you are cutting to the front of this line and demanding your will be done?*

Fortunate for the cause of decency, Jesus has remarkable intuition about the circuitry of power running through the human condition, about those desires electrifying his opponents' jealousy and sparking his compatriots' ambition. He gets himself into predicaments, yes – he was run out

of his hometown synagogue just a few chapters back⁸ – yet what commotions he creates, he provokes clear-eyed. In this exchange, trust Jesus’s savvy: he realizes Zebedees’ boys’ satisfaction with the subordinate chairs they seek will last only so long; if given these positions, they will eventually come for his seat, too.

Even so, I admit finding some fresh air in James’ and John’s candor: “Jesus, we want to run this show! Make it hap’n, cap’n.” While the unchecked ambition remains gross, I do appreciate their honesty – I suspect because I cannot often say the same for *our* ambitions. That is, we also coddle desires for power and control, but we hide them, *lie* about them.

These days, we disguise our ambition as complaint.

Rather than constructive criticism intended to strengthen our common life, we ball our daily disappointments and lifelong grudges into volleys of shame and fury. We indiscriminately fire this arsenal at neighbors ... colleagues ... strangers ... organizations. Focused first on ourselves and the improvement of *our* community positions, we ignore others’ gifts and graces, their experience and expertise, much less their lives and loves. Bunkered behind monitors and touchscreens, we presume entitlement to judge any and all matters, any and *everyone*.

It’s like we’re eating while we’re driving: Filet-O-Fish in hand, working the steering wheel with a knee and realizing suddenly we have to slam our brakes. And, when we do, the fry we had just squirted with ketchup breaks in half, the heavier, ketchup side falling right on our shirt – *bloop*. And, man, we are maaadd as double-hockey-sticks. We start honking and cussing the car in front of us, shaking our square fish out its bun, though we don’t even know if the offending vehicle actually stopped short or we were just lost in the deliciousness of whatever magic McDooDoo’s sprinkles on their fries.⁹

Now, I realize we do not deliver all feedback so glibly – but the point travels: our judgements too often have little to do with their destination; our disapprovals are about *us*, about improving *our* stature. And we *lie* about that ambition.

We nobly claim our censures “speak truth to power,” yet the frequency and intensity of our collective and constant smears have created a social economy that invests more power in criticism than in solutions and service ... *we have created a social economy that invests more power in criticism than in solutions and service*. Though this captious¹⁰ culture often affirms critics as “brave,” self-declared pundits risk *nothing* of themselves or their standing by their condemnations. Such attacks accrue status *to the attackers*, no matter the cost to others, no matter what was necessary or true or helpful or good.

Back to ol’ Pete Bouchard, criticizing the local forecast has endured across generations as a parochial pastime. You know, being present and subject to weather every day of our lives, we presume a *Farmer’s Almanac* sort of wisdom about it. Even so, those kitchen-table and water-cooler grumbles generally assumed the best intentions of, say, the National Weather Service,

whose scientists have an obvious stake in doing their best and getting their predictions right as often as they can.

Somehow that good humor has devolved into death threats against meteorologists!¹¹ Inspired by inane claims about the collusion of government and local weather affiliates to create and aim storms for partisan purposes, we amplify and affirm even base idiocy! And here's the hook: this captious culture we have created – in which all of us are complicit, no matter our politics – it coopts the sane challenges to this madness and blunts their impact, casts them as only more ignorable, Libs-Of-Tik-Tok flak in the harangue.

I mean, let us pray to the Lord;
*Lord, have mercy!*¹²

Our Gospel continues: “When the ten heard this, they began to be angry with James and John.”¹³ Then follows: “So Jesus called *them* and said to *them*.”¹⁴ I value here the third-person-plural pronoun, a reference that helpfully fuzzies whether Jesus responds only to James and John ... or to the other disciples, too ... or even the other disciples *only*, for the rest of that lot may have decided that their indignation – righteous and understandable as it may be – has granted them permission for ruthlessness. Jesus declares to “them” and *to us*: “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; instead, whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all.”¹⁵

A note about this vocabulary: the Greek word rendered here as “servant” is δίακονος, the familiar root of “Deacon” and often translated in the Christian Testament as “minister.” The Greek word rendered here as “slave” is δοῦλος, the word from which we derive the term, “doula,” and often translated as “servant.” So, the NRSV translators apply a heightening effect to Jesus’ declaration, intensifying his metaphor from the work of a personal servant, to that of one enslaved by all people.

While acknowledging the distinctions between slavery in the ancient world and that scourge in our nation’s history, I believe the reference here clouds Jesus’ intention for us. Hear that last line with the alternate vocabulary: “... whoever wishes to become great among you must be your *minister*,¹⁶ and whoever wishes to be first among you must be *servant* of all.” In this rendering, Jesus more clearly calls us to establish a culture of mutual service, rather than competing ambitions ... *mutual service, rather than competing ambitions*.

On the other side of this election, the people of God will have work to do, no matter the outcome, for the division and meanness we suffer today will remain in place on November 6. And, Trinitarians, at some point, the fulfillment of God’s hopes will require some one – some *ones* – to offer themselves in a sacrifice that does not benefit their standing, not on earth, not in heaven ... to offer themselves in a spirit of service that sincerely sets the needs of others before their own

... some ones to refuse othering and dehumanizing their neighbors with polemics ... some ones to love those with whom they disagree, to love them as God loves them.

We need not accept responsibility for all the madness of our days, to pull ourselves out of the powerlessness that scrolling and swiping and clicking reinforces; to get out from behind our steering wheels and screens and to *see one another*; to stop hiding and disguising our self-serving ambitions, and to aspire *Gospel* greatness, instead; to recognize our agency, to accept what we can do, to earn and inspire leadership built upon values of humility and grace and mercy and peace.

Friends, Jesus challenges all our excuses and points us to a higher calling. *May we accept it.*

Held in Common by God's Love,
Amen.

¹ From Psalm 31.

² [Bouchard works as Chief Meteorologist at NBC 10 in Boston](#). My family and I appreciate that he can season his acerbic style with smiles and pinches of humor.

³ [Cohn works as the Chief Political Analyst at The New York Times](#). His county-by-county, parish-by-parish meter predicted Georgia to Biden before anyone else and when it seemed unlikely from the topline tallies.

⁴ [I am a fan of Yglesias' Substack, Slow Boring](#).

⁵ Mark 10:35.

⁶ Mark 10:36.

⁷ Mark 10:37.

⁸ Mark 6:1-6.

⁹ Despite my being well read into the campaigns, I did not realize Donald Trump was visiting McDonald's today. No matter, their fries remain really delicious food-ish products, and, every now and then, the only thing I want to eat is a Filet-O-Fish. Also, this was likely a Trinity Church pulpit debut of "doodoo," spoken in any context.

¹⁰ I'm a sucker for the alliterative dyad. "Captious" shares a root with "caption," and the culture I intend to reference feels like we have decided everyone, all the time, gets to add a judgmental comment beneath every moment, every person, every organization, every dadgum thing. In addition to the constant criticism, the habit has a performative, even dissociative element to it, like we pretend to live in an episode of *The Office* and constantly look over to the film crew's camera to deliver a reaction for our audience.

¹¹ [Lord, have mercy.](#)

¹² From the Prayers of the People form we are currently using, but also my preferred expression of exasperation (see note xi).

¹³ Mark 10:41.

¹⁴ Mark 10:42a. Italics mine.

¹⁵ Mark 10:42b-43.

¹⁶ Minister here more like caregiver, or “one responsible for.”