

A Ransom for Many

Hebrews 5:1-10; Mark 10:35-45

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

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I want to begin by repeating the words of Jesus that we just heard from Mark 10:42:

You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them...

I wonder, have you ever had the experience of someone “lording it over” you?

Maybe you’ve worked for a dictator, someone who constantly played the power card to get you to do what they wanted. The power dynamics in many workplaces can be pretty straightforward. The boss has the power (and enjoys the power) and everyone else has to do what they say.

Maybe it was a co-worker or someone on a committee or community group you served on. Maybe it was a coach who liked to yell and scream and belittle to “motivate” his team.

Maybe it was a “friend” or acquaintance who could never really pass up an opportunity to let you know that they had more education or a larger salary or a more prestigious position than you. I suspect many of us have people in our social circles who always need to be seen as the smartest and most competent person in the room.

Maybe—and it pains me to say this because I know it happens far too often—it was a pastor. Maybe you were a part of a church where the pastor abused his or her position, where it was their way or the highway, where if you didn’t believe rightly enough, give generously enough, serve selflessly enough, or buy into their vision enthusiastically enough, you were put in your place.

Maybe—and now we are wandering into *really* painful terrain—it was in the more intimate domains of family and marriage. Maybe you had a tyrant for a father or mother. Maybe it was a spouse. Maybe you suffered emotional, physical, even sexual abuse. Maybe someone “lorded it over you” in some of the deepest and most painful ways possible.

Wherever and however someone “lorded it over” you, I want you to ask a very simple question. How did it feel?

My guess is, not particularly good.

When we feel that someone is lording it over us, we feel small, unimportant, ignored, powerless. We feel like we don't really matter, like our humanity, our unique individuality is overlooked or deliberately disregarded. We feel disposable, like we are only there to be used for someone else's ends.

And we probably feel angry. We know that power should not be used in this way, that this should not be the way human beings relate to one another.

Our cultural moment is currently dominated by talk of power and privilege and the various dynamics that play into this (race, gender, history, etc.). This is a good, important, and overdue conversation.

But on the most basic and human level, the "lording over" of power is a simple violation of Jesus' most basic commandment from Matthew 7:12:

So, in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets.

When someone is lording it over us, the question that most naturally and obviously (and often painfully) occurs to us is, "Would *you* like to be treated like this?"

Deep down in our bones we know that our uses and abuses of power—our tendency to "lord it over" each other—this is not how things are supposed to be.

Well, Jesus isn't talking to the powerful in our gospel text this morning. He's not talking to corporate bosses or prominent pastors or those who occupy influential positions in society.

He's talking to his disciples. He's talking to those who were likely well-acquainted with being on the wrong end of power, who were familiar with having it "lorded over" them.

And yet James and John still craved it. They aren't really interested in dismantling the whole system where the people in power lord it over those who don't. They just want to be on the other side.

Let's set the scene. Jesus' crucifixion is looming. In the verses immediately preceding today's text, Jesus has, for the third time, explicitly predicted his death.

We are going up to Jerusalem," he said, "and the Son of Man will be delivered over to the chief priests and the teachers of the law. They will condemn him to death and will hand him over to the Gentiles, who will mock him and spit on him, flog him and kill him. Three days later he will rise." (Mark 10:32-34).

In a quite spectacular exercise in missing the point, James and John take this opportunity to ask Jesus if they can have positions of power and authority in Jesus' coming kingdom.

Jesus has just talked about his coming death and resurrection—the very hinge of history, the decisive moment in God's salvation narrative. And the people around him are saying in effect, "Interesting... What's in it for me?"

James and John's response is such a human one. They have left everything to follow Jesus. They've puzzled over his strange teaching, witnessed his miracles.

And now they are trembling with anticipation at the triumph that is surely coming. They are primed to rule with Jesus. They'd like a front row seat (and a bit of power) when the action starts.

"Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory" (Mark 10:37).

Jesus responds to their request, as usual, enigmatically: "You don't know what you are asking... Can you drink the cup I am going to drink?"

James and John answer (rather optimistically and naively): "Yes, of course we can."

Then Jesus says something even stranger:

The cup that I drink you will drink; and with the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized; but to sit at my right hand or at my left is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared.

I've always puzzled over that last bit. Ok, so who gets to sit on the right and the left? If not James and John, then who? Don't leave us hanging, Jesus! Who are "those for whom it has been prepared?"

I usually scratch my head for a few moments after reading verses like this, before consigning them to the “weird things that Jesus says about the distant future” category of my brain.

But it’s interesting to consider Jesus’ response in its immediate context.

In the very next chapter of Mark’s gospel, Jesus enters the city of Jerusalem as Israel’s ironic king, riding on a donkey, kicking into motion events that will come to a head with his crucifixion five days later.

This is Jesus’ coronation. Not a crown of glory but a crown of thorns. Not a triumphant display of divine power, but a “weak” expression of self-emptying and sacrifices. Not a throne but a Roman cross.

So, if the cross is Jesus “coming in glory,” who is at his left and his right?

Well, it’s a pair of criminals. Perhaps they were armed revolutionaries. Perhaps they were anti-Rome demonstrators. All we really know is that they were there, like Jesus, as object lessons of the power and brutality of the empire and the futility of resistance.

These were the ones that were granted the positions that James and John were so convinced they wanted. These were the ones who were present at Jesus’ “coronation,” who occupied the places to his left and his right when his kingdom finally came.

I don’t know if this is precisely what Jesus meant in his response, but it would be just like him, wouldn’t it?

Many of his followers—then and now—are preoccupied with trying to secure benefits and prizes and rewards from God, scrambling to use Jesus to clamber up the religious ladder or the political ladder or whatever other ladder we figure he can help us climb.

And Jesus sighs and shakes his head. You don’t know what you’re asking... or what you’re doing... or what you’re hoping for... or much of anything about this kingdom that I am bringing.

And he’s right. We don’t really know much about what we are asking or doing when it comes to Jesus and his kingdom.

We nod along to all of Jesus’ words about love and peace and humility.

But when it comes right down to it, we're still kind of keeping an eye out for those more impressive seats on Jesus' left and right in a kingdom that looks mostly like the kingdoms we're familiar with.

Humble Jesus will do his humble thing, Servant Jesus will do his serving, but then the object lesson will be over, and King Jesus will get down to ruling. And when he does, well, we'll be ready.

We humans are experts in asking the wrong questions based on wrong assumptions about things like kings and kingdoms and where the action is.

At any rate, the other ten disciples hear about what James and John have been up to and they are, understandably, angry.

I think it would be a stretch to assume that their anger is particularly righteous or that it comes out of any deep understanding of the nature of Jesus' kingdom. They're probably just annoyed that James and John are doing some advanced lobbying for positions that they have their eye on, too.

And in response to all this jealousy and anger and confused squabbling over power, Jesus sits everyone down for a little chat.

And he says four very important words.

Four words that I want us to leave this building with today. Four words that I want us to have ringing around in our ears whenever we are tempted to grasp after power and status and to put all the wrong-thinking, wrong-doing people in their place.

Not so among you.

Look around, Jesus says. You see how things work all around you. You see how power games are played out there in the world (and, sadly, we must add, in here, in the church).

You see how desperately people crave power and status and admiration. You see all the ways in which people manipulate others and situations to gain these things.

You see how things work. Not so among you.

Instead....

Whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave.

As Christians, our primary conviction is that every one of our neighbours bears the image of God, and that our posture toward them is to that of Christ's posture to us.

We are called to imitate Jesus who attained greatness by serving and giving his life as a ransom for many.

Of course, Jesus is doing more than teaching about power dynamics or giving relationship advice or offering tips on behaviour modification, important as all these things are.

This passage in Mark is indeed an important lesson on humility and servanthood, but it is much more.

Jesus is also foreshadowing his own death and teaching his disciples and us something fundamental about the very nature of God, and about how our salvation is won.

This is repeated in our reading from Hebrews. Jesus is our High Priest, our intermediary, the one who offered the final sacrifice for sin.

But this High Priest is utterly unique. He does not offer sacrifices on behalf of the people but is *himself* the sacrifice—the final sacrifice to end all sacrifices.

He is a priest who knows our weakness, who knows what it is to cry, to long, to enter into the depths of our humanity. He is a priest who knows what it is to suffer.

Hebrews 5:8 says that Jesus “learned obedience from what he suffered, and once made perfect he became the eternal source of salvation.

(Incidentally, this “made perfect” likely doesn't refer to moral perfection but attaining to suitability for a role. So, Jesus' suffering didn't fill in some moral gap in his character but played a role in preparing him for the priestly role he would fulfill.)

His suffering servanthood is the means by which he becomes a priest forever. “In the order of Melchizedek,” Hebrews says, which is a way of saying that Jesus perfectly and utterly uniquely and eternally combines the role of priest and king.

Jesus enacts everything that he teaches. When he tells his followers not to grasp after power to lord over others, he goes out and submits himself to a suffering death.

Jesus lorded power over no one. And he doesn't do this today either.

His love is patient, longsuffering, invitational, always respecting our freedom to accept or reject him. Jesus compels no one into the kingdom.

I want to end with the words from Hebrews that immediately precede the passage we heard:

Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has ascended into heaven, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess.

For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin.

Let us then approach God's throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.

Let us hold firmly to the faith that we have been given. Jesus is with us and Jesus is for us. Jesus knows us truly and loves us. Jesus

Let us emulate our teacher, our great high priest by seeking to serve rather than to be served. Let us seek to be last rather than first.

Let us anchor our identities in Jesus and his way, confident that it is *his* way, not the tired old ways of our tired old world—ways of power games, lording it over one another, scrambling after status and control—that the world is made new.

Amen.

