

Box Seats and Bleachers

Sermon preached by the Rev. Robert A. Arbogast

Olentangy Church

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Mark 10:35-45

More than once, Jesus told his disciples what was coming: that he would be betrayed, that he would be killed, that he would rise. He said it plainly enough, but for some reason it didn't sink in.

James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came and said to Jesus, "Teacher, whatever we ask you, we want you to do for us." He said to them, "What do you want me to do for you?" They said to him, "Grant this to us: that in your glory one of us may sit at your right and one at your left." Jesus said to them, "You don't know what you're asking. Can you drink the cup that I drink? Or undergo the baptism that I undergo?" They said to him, "We can." But Jesus said to them, "You will drink the cup that I drink, and you will undergo the baptism that I undergo. But sitting at my right or left is not mine to grant. That's been made ready for others."

When the ten found out, they got angry with James and John. Then Jesus called them and said, "You know that those who seem to be 'in charge' among the Gentiles dominate them, and that their 'great' ones are tyrants over them. But that's not how it is among you. No, whoever among you wants to be great must be your servant, and whoever among you wants to be first must be everyone's slave. You see, the Son of Man did not come to be served, but in order to serve and to give his life to be a ransom for many people."

Children's Story

It's important for a squirrel to know how to stack acorns inside a hollow tree. During a long winter, those nuts are a matter of life and death for squirrels.

Sammy the Squirrel is a champion acorn stacker. I mean it. He's a real champion.

You see, every year the squirrels of the Great Forest have an acorn-stacking contest. Squirrels come from every corner of the forest to strut their acorn-stacking stuff.

Some of them build tall, slender stacks. Some of them build low, wide stacks. Sammy has his own style. He spaces the acorns just right to make a stack that is tall and wide and plenty strong.

For three years in a row now, Sammy the Squirrel has won the Great Forest Acorn-Stacking Contest. He has the blue ribbons to prove it.

Here's another piece of proof of how good Sammy is. In this year's contest, other squirrels were building their acorn stacks Sammy's way. Sammy still came out on top, though.

Sammy the Squirrel is the best acorn stacker the Great Forest has ever seen. But that's not a big deal to Sammy. He just likes to stack acorns. And he likes to do it as best he can. It's all part of being a squirrel.

Sermon

In some church traditions, preachers shape their sermons according to a three-fold repetition. "First, I tell them what I'm going to say. Then I say it. And then I tell them what I said." The goal, I suppose, is for the message to sink in under the weight of the repetitions. I wonder if it works, if it works today.

Apparently it did not work for Jesus. Three times he told his disciples, "The Son of Man will be betrayed. He will be killed. And he will rise." Three times he told them, but still they didn't get it. James and John are Exhibit A.

The two sons of Zebedee had visions of royal splendor on their minds. Sure, Jesus was living simply and humbly for now. And yes, he had people who were after him. People who wanted to discredit him. People who wanted to arrest him. And people who wanted him dead. But wasn't David in the same predicament before he reached his throne? Living in the wilderness. Surviving with a small band of followers by cunning, by creativity, and by the kindness, or calculation, of others? And then David did claim his throne. And Israel's most glorious days began.

James and John apparently had a similar vision for Jesus. At the time, they were on their way together to Jerusalem. There everything would be sorted out. There Jesus, the Messiah, would begin his reign. There he would be, as James and John put it, “in his glory.” And some of that glory, naturally, would be theirs to share in.

It was not an unnatural expectation. James and John, with Peter, formed a sort of inner circle around Jesus. More than once Jesus had taken just the three of them aside for something special. Most recently they were there, and none of the others, on the mountain when Jesus was transfigured. So James and John had expectations. And here they were, trying to get a jump on all the others, including Peter.

What they wanted, to put it bluntly, was to have the best seats in the house. They said, “We want to be at your right and at your left, Jesus.” In other words, “We want to be in the thick of things as you operate the levers of power, in the thick of things as you administer a kingdom that covers the whole world. We want to see what can’t be seen from anywhere else. And we want to enjoy some of the glory and the glow.”

I’ve been to a number of Columbus Blue Jackets games of the years. Once we sat up in the nosebleed seats. Most often we have sat in mid-level seats. But one time we had rink-side seats. And I’ll tell you, there is no better place to see than game than from rink-side seats. What a view of unfolding plays, of heads-up passing, and of the line change dance! And what a view of smash-him-into-the-boards checking! There’s no better place to see the game than from rink-side seats. And if you’re lucky, you might get on the Jumbotron or even on national TV.

That’s a long way from the centerfield bleachers at Fenway Park in Boston, which were cheap seats when I was a kid. Not like those box seats along the first base line, the seats we dreamed of having. James and John were dreaming about box seats. They could not have been more wrong.

What Jesus had to offer them instead was a more sober experience. There was a cup to drink, and they would drink it, too. Not a cup filled with the wine of gladness, but a cup of sorrow, a cup of agony, a cup filled to the rim with the sour dregs of human sin and divine anger. Jesus would drink that cup, would drink it full. And James and John would not be spared its bitter taste. There was also a baptism to undergo, and they would undergo it, too. This baptism was not a celebration to bring family and friends together. Nor was it an occasion for cake and ice cream. No, with this baptism we’re talking about deadly waters, about a descent into death with no escape. Jesus was on his way to die. Their lives, James’ and John’s lives, would be forfeit, too.

And here’s what’s important about the cup and the baptism. They are no aberrations. Sorrow, suffering, and death for Jesus are no diversion from the kingdom. They are no delay or side-track. No, they are instead exactly how the kingdom comes. And they are, at the same time, an embodiment of exactly how the kingdom is.

Jesus emptied himself. He became nothing. He became a mere human being, a servant, a slave. We tend to think of that as his time in the wilderness, before he was able to enter the promised land. But does Jesus shuck off his human nature, does he slip out of his flesh, does he forsake his servant form, when he rises and then ascends to the right hand of the Father? No. He retains the humble nature that he took on. You see, humility is an enduring characteristic of Jesus the Messiah, the King. And humility is an enduring characteristic of his kingdom.

James and John wanted to sit next to Jesus in his glory, when his royal splendor would be in full display. But Jesus said those places had been prepared for others, not for them. Mark, the gospel writer, pulls these threads together later in his gospel when he writes that Jesus was crucified and that two insurrectionists were crucified with him, “one at his right, one at his left” (Mark 15:27). In other words, on the cross the glory of Jesus the King is in full display! On the cross. The cross is no aberration from the way of the kingdom. It is the way of the kingdom. “The Son of Man did not come to be served” – that’s not how the kingdom works – “but in order to serve and to give his life to be a ransom for many people.” That’s how the kingdom works, from the king on down.

This challenges the way our world works, on trivial and profound levels. To begin, the way of the kingdom challenges the perpetual need we seem to have to come out on top.

I was excited when the Boston Red Sox finally won the World Series in 2004. Does it really matter, though? Of course not! I won't say that winning doesn't matter. But some things are more worth winning than others. And one could ask what really counts as winning. Is winning something you buy, as the Red Sox and Yankees tend to do? Or is it something you suffer toward?

Here's another one: marching band competitions. (Martha's in the school marching band now, so this one is on my mind.) Bands learn their instruments. They learn their songs. And they learn their marching patterns. Then they compete against each other before a panel of judges. But who turned music into a competition? What does winning and losing have to do with music? Music moves the heart and the hips. Music moves the soul and the spirit. Music is a gift from God that helps communities be and express who they are. But music as a battle, as a contest, instead of as a humble contribution to a community or a people . . . ? That's not the way of the kingdom, is it?

And I'm not just picking on marching bands. Music as a competition or as a battle is everywhere in our culture. The biggest battle, of course, is the one over chart position, gross sales, and Grammy awards. Or the battle for the latest American Idol crown. Somehow, though, I'd rather listen to music born from the struggles of life, instead of from musicians going head to head in some competition.

And what about the Nobel Peace Prize, awarded this year to President Obama? I think the kingdom is much less about the movers and shakers and the awards and accolades they give one another, than it is about street-level people quietly doing what they do. It's just a guess, but I would guess that there are many peace-makers working at street level, giving their all, unknown and unsung, except by a very few. People for whom peace is not a hobby but a life's work. People who are answering a gospel call even. These people never get a Nobel prize. They're not on the radar of those who make the nominations. But they don't care. They will work and they will struggle and they will suffer and they will die if they have to, whether anyone notices or not. That's how the kingdom works, and not by the movers and the shakers congratulating each other.

And similar things could be said about medicine, education, manufacturing, banking, just about everything, where we always want to come out on top. But Jesus says, "If you want to be great, be a servant. And if you want to be first, be everyone's slave." And the point is not, "Be a servant for a while, be a slave for a while. Then there will be glory and a big celebration of how wonderful you are." No, the point is, "Be a servant, be a slave. Because that's how the kingdom works. Celebrations, awards, championships, coming out on top? None of that matters!"

That doesn't sound like the world we live in, does it? Do you suppose it's past time for us, for every kingdom citizen, for every kingdom community – do you suppose it's past time for us to model a different, a better way?