

“King of the Hill”

Matthew 20:20-28

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Remember the kids’ game “king of the hill?” Everyone scrambles to get to the top of the pile—usually just a crummy little pile of dirt. You struggle and fight your way to the top, and then you try to defend it and toss down anyone who can get to the top and challenge you.

I imagine the disciples James and John would like that game. They were brothers, the sons of Zebedee, and Jesus called them Sons of Thunder. They knew how to make the other disciples angry. You’d be annoyed by the brothers, too, even if they *were* Jesus’ cousins. Why should they be special?

But the two Zebedee brothers weren’t the only ones with an attitude; at the end of chapter 19, Peter asked Jesus, “What’s in it for us if we follow you?” (See 19:26.) Then, in the first part of chapter 20, Jesus tells a parable to confront the problem of feeling better than others. Now he has to deal with his followers trying to get advantage over others.

Jesus knew what they were thinking: that’s the way of the world. To get what you can, to push ahead of others, to put yourself first. In the world, the great ones are the ones who influence others, control others.

But in the kingdom, greatness is something else. It’s only based on how well you serve. Jesus says, “But many who are first will be last, and many who are last will be first.” (Matthew 19:30)

Now, the timing of James’ and John’s mother’s question couldn’t be worse. But it fits a pattern with the disciples. Jesus already told them they had to follow him in the way of the cross. That means the way to be a follower of Jesus is to be self-sacrificial. Three times, Jesus says he has to suffer. Three times, the disciples tried to show Jesus they want victory, not defeat. And three times, Jesus corrected them.

First cycle:

From that time on Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life. (Matthew 16:21)

Peter tries to tell Jesus, “That’ll never happen.” And Jesus tells Peter, “Get behind me, Satan!” Then Jesus explains,

“If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.” (Matthew 16:24)

Second cycle:

When they came together in Galilee, he said to them, "The Son of Man is going to be betrayed into the hands of men. They will kill him, and on the third day he will be raised to life." (Matthew 17:22-23)

Right after that, the disciples start asking about who will be the greatest in the kingdom. The message just hasn't gotten through their heads. (See Matthew 18:1.) Then Jesus tells them you can't get into the kingdom unless you're like a little child.

Therefore, whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. (Matthew 18:4)

Third cycle:

Now as Jesus was going up to Jerusalem, he took the twelve disciples aside and said to them, "We are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be betrayed to the chief priests and the teachers of the law. They will condemn him to death and will turn him over to the Gentiles to be mocked and flogged and crucified. On the third day he will be raised to life!" (Matthew 20:17-19)

At that's the exact moment the Zebedee brother's mom comes to ask for them to have the highest honor in the kingdom. Great timing, huh? From the way Mark tells the story in his Gospel we know it's actually the Zebedee brothers who are making their request through their mother, and they do it right after Jesus talked about suffering and dying.

Jesus answers, "You don't know what you're asking." In fact, he says "you" in the plural—he knows it's not really the mother's question, or at least not all hers. He's talking to James and John, and he's talking to all the disciples, too. It's an ongoing struggle for disciples—we want to do what Jesus wants, but we have a hard time getting beyond ourselves. We have a hard time seeing Jesus vision for us, and we have an even harder time living up to it.

In the end, the disciples really did walk the way of the cross. Jesus asked them, "Can you drink the cup I am going to drink?" and they said "Yes."

Jesus said to them, "You will indeed drink from my cup..." (Matthew 20:23)

What was that cup? How did that work?

The cup was the cup of God's judgment.

The issue isn't whether or not James and John *can* drink the cup; the issue is simply that they *will* drink the cup. It means to suffer, to be a witness to Jesus through suffering. It's like Paul says later in the New Testament,

Now I rejoice in what was suffered for you, and I fill up in my flesh what is still lacking in regard to Christ's afflictions, for the sake of his body, which is the church. (Colossians 1:24)

Jesus' death was the perfect sacrifice, and when he died, he said, "It is *finished*. The penalty for sin was completely paid for. Paul was saying there's a part we have to play. We follow Jesus' model in losing our life in order to find it.

Later in the Bible we see that Herod arrested James along with some other followers of Jesus, and,

He had James, the brother of John, put to death with the sword. (Acts 12:2)

And John might have been the same John as the one who wrote the last book of the Bible, where the author writes,

I, John, your brother and companion in the suffering and kingdom and patient endurance that are ours in Jesus, was on the island of Patmos because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus." (Revelation 1:9)

James and John didn't end up with status and privilege, they ended up being witnesses—the word where we get the word martyr, someone who gives up their life.

So what does have to say to us as we look at the New Year? Jesus himself gives us the lesson:

"Whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave—just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." (Matthew 20:26-28)

First, Jesus wants to make us great.

Not the push-myself-to-the-front-of-the-line kind of greatness like the world understands it. But he says there's a kind of greatness that comes from serving, and it's the source of joy and a satisfying life.

We become great when we have a holy ambition to be like Jesus.

He says, "Whoever wants to be first must be your slave." Not just nice, but a servant who puts other people's needs in front of your own. But to have ambition to see the world come to know Jesus, to see God in him, to have new life in him. That's holy ambition, to see what God's doing and to get on board, to see what he's doing and asking if you can help.

It's hard to see what God's doing sometimes. It's hard to have perspective on our own life and our own times. I think we see some of the mysterious ways God works when we take a look back. In many ways the past 10 years have been tumultuous, with natural disasters on an epic scale, like tsunamis, Hurricane Katrina, and earthquake in China; there were bank failures and unemployment, war and 9/11.

But through it all God has preserved his church.

J. Lee Grady, editor of *Charisma Magazine*, pointed out in an editorial last week that there are now 600 million Christians in Africa; Protestant Christianity grew 600 percent in Vietnam. China, where Christians are persecuted, now has 130 million people going to church. The

church is mushrooming in Central America, Brazil, India, Ethiopia, and in Indonesia, the world's largest Muslim country.

In fact, the media loves to say Islam is the world's fastest-growing religion, but it's Christianity, and that projection looks like a sure bet for the 21st century.

Even in the middle of the Great Recession, when the mortgage bubble burst and unemployment reached 10 percent, charitable giving went up 5.5 percent in 2008. Like Grady says, "faith thrives in a recession."

Do you want to have a great new year? Do you want to be growing in greatness yourself? Look what God's doing. He's changing the world, and he invites you to be a part of it.