

Encounters with Jesus: Mother Zebedee

LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church

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Matthew 20:17-28

Almost ten years ago now, a UCLA child psychologist named Yalda Uhls conducted a study to compare the stated values of children in 2014 with those of children in previous generations. She wanted to understand how tweens, kids between the ages of 8 and 12, were interacting with digital culture and how societal motivations were shifting over time.

Uhls asked the kids to rank what they valued from a list of seven: community feeling, image, benevolence, fame, self-acceptance, financial success, and achievement. Which value do you think came out on top? Image? Self-acceptance? Financial success? None of those. Fame. 40% of the tweens in the study selected fame as the item in the list they valued most.

Uhls found that “the biggest change, in the interest in fame, occurred from 1997 to 2007, when YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter exploded. Their growth parallels the rise in narcissism and the drop in empathy among college students in the United States. We don't think this correlation is a coincidence.”

If you were a tween in 2014 and you're now a young adult, or even if you're older than that and belong to the decade that came of age when the internet was exploding, please don't hear me picking on you. The lure of being internet famous might be relatively new. Fame might be more attainable for more people now than ever before. But our interest in famous people or the desire we have to be influential ourselves predates all of us. It's part of this world we live in, and it's not new. It shows up in the thoughts and desires of Jesus' first followers too.

So today we're listening to Jesus as he encounters some of his closest followers as they express their desire to be significant; and we're watching as Jesus shows them how to use their influence for him. We started our reading for this encounter with Jesus on the road to Jerusalem. Jesus' clear warning to the disciples about what awaits him there still rings in the disciples' ears when Mother Zebedee and her sons come to Jesus with their request.

If the journey is going to be as hard as Jesus says it will be, if he's going up to Jerusalem to die, maybe this is the moment to ask for the inheritance the Zebedee family thinks only Jesus can grant: Celebrity. Honor. Recognition. Posts of influence when he comes into his kingdom.

Who are the sons of Zebedee? We met them a couple of weeks ago when Rev. Jonker preached from Matthew 4. Jesus called them out of the boat, away from their father and their fishing nets. From Mark we know that these guys were powerhouses. Jesus nicknamed the brothers the “sons of thunder.” Luke's gospel tells us that when the Samaritans refused to welcome Jesus into their territory, James and John asked if they should call down fire from heaven on them. Yet notwithstanding their lively temperaments, James and John are also two of the three people in Jesus' inner circle. They're stunned and terrified as they witness Moses, Elijah, and Jesus at the Transfiguration. They'll be with Jesus in Gethsemane on the hardest night of his life. Within his group of disciples, they're important. Out of the twelve, Jesus relies most on Peter, James, and John.

We have a fuzzier gospel portrait of James and John's mother. But based on the lists of women watching near Jesus' cross in Matthew (27:56), Mark (15:40), and John (19:25), commentators think it is possible that James and John's mother is a woman named Salome. Jesus' aunt, his mother's sister. If that's the case, James and John would be Jesus' cousins. So very possibly it's Aunt Salome, Cousin James and Cousin John who have an audience with Jesus in our passage this morning.

As so many others have, the mother of Zebedee's sons kneels before him. “What is it you want?” Jesus asks her. “Grant that one of these two sons of mine may sit at your right and the other at your left in your kingdom,” she says. “Nominate James and John to influential posts in your cabinet, Jesus, won't you? Pave the way for their appointment as vice president and secretary of state.”

Jesus shakes his head. “Are you sure you really want that? You don't know what you're asking,” he says to all three of them. “Can you drink the cup I am going to drink?” James sets his jaw and John nods. “We can,” they say. “OK,” Jesus says. “You will indeed drink from my cup, but to sit at my right or left is not for me to grant. These places belong to those for whom they have been prepared by my Father.” Jesus is under no

illusions: Things aren't going to be sunshine and roses for the Zebedee brothers. Sharing in Jesus' glory always also means participating in his suffering. James and John will indeed drink from Jesus' cup. Acts 12 tells us James is killed by Herod Agrippa's sword, the first of the apostles to die a martyr. And John ends up exiled on the island of Patmos because of his ministry in the name of Jesus (Rev. 1:9). "You don't know what you are asking," Jesus tells them. "Reigning with me means suffering with me. And your request is not for me to grant."

What's behind Mother Zebedee's request? Might James and John have asked mom to put in a word with Jesus knowing they really shouldn't ask for privileged positions, but then again if Mom brought the request. Or maybe the brothers think of Jesus' statement seemingly about Peter, "on this rock I will build my church," (Mt. 16:18). Clearly Peter is at the top of the influence roster. Perhaps if they don't say something they'll be way down the list in Jesus' lineup. Whatever the case, on the way up to Jerusalem the three of them seek a specific guarantee that they are valuable, important in Jesus' kingdom.

When have you brought a "Mother Zebedee" request to Jesus? When have you asked him for something that you later realized he would not or could not grant? We kneel before Jesus and hear him say, "What do you want?" And sometimes, if we strip away the veneer of our own self-deception, maybe we respond with things like this: "I want you to make my work successful, my opinion valuable, and my life inspirational." "I want you to give my children the knowledge, skills, aptitudes and connections they need to get ahead in this world." And so gently and patiently, with love in his eyes, sometimes Jesus meets us and says, "You don't know what you are asking. Your share in my glory is also a sharing in my suffering. I have other goals than these for your life."

In reality, James and John didn't have to worry about being left out or forgotten. Mother Zebedee really didn't need to plead her case. Because Jesus has already promised places of honor to all twelve disciples. "Truly I tell you," Jesus says in Matthew 19, "at the renewal of all things, when the Son of Man sits on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel." Given that promise, it's understandable that when the other 10 disciples hear about this request from the brothers they are "indignant." This is Matthew's understated way of letting us know that the 10 wished they had thought of asking Jesus for high places of honor too. James and John's mistaken desire to claim the privileges of rank is also the mistaken desire of the other disciples. Because there is no rank here. Each of the disciples is already highly valued in the now-and-future reign of Jesus.

So Jesus calls the twelve to huddle up, not just so that he can rebuke their envious spirits or change their thinking; but so that in nearness to him they continue to hear, see, and receive a better way of life. Jesus is calling them near and showing them the servant way. "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them," Jesus says, "and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, 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." The way to glory and greatness is not through privileged positions. The way to greatness is through service.

The verbs Jesus uses for the exercise of worldly authority are intensified forms. Here's one way to paraphrase Matthew 19:25: "You know that the world's leaders are not simply reigning but actually domineering; and their 'great ones' are not just authoritative but actually authoritarian. But it must not be this way among you!"

Jesus' prescription for the human ambition for greatness and recognition is direct service, applied freely to the heart and mind and hands. For disciples inclined to request power and recognition that isn't theirs, Jesus turns the desire for honor on its head. A habit and posture of humble service will do the trick. This posture makes faith in Christ compelling for those who know Jesus and those who don't yet: Ordinary people with servant lives who spread the fragrance of Jesus in this world.

In her book *Celebrities for Jesus*, Katelyn Beatty names what has made Christian faith compelling for her: "If I could point to a defining factor that has made Christian faith alluring plausible and real to me it is this: other Christians. Not specific leaders or figureheads teaching and preaching from a stage or a screen far away. Certainly not any famous Bible teachers and social media influencers, even the ones whose writing and teaching has undeniably enriched my life. I mean ordinary flawed messy fellow humans working out what it means to love God and neighbor day in and day out without fanfare or praise. The people I have in mind don't have their sights set on any strategy plan or outcome. Their left hand knows not what their right hand is doing. They simply find their lives taken up in an eternal reality larger than themselves and they live with a sense that small

acts of love in this life carry great significance in the next. What makes Christianity, more specifically Christ, real to me are the people in my life.”

Everyday Jesus’ servants engage in loving acts in his name. People who unload dishwashers and make meals, do gross jobs and answer the same question 13 times, and ask Jesus for strength to do it again tomorrow. Church members who teach Sunday School and lead Scouts, teens who work in the nursery and pray for Jesus to be real to the kids they serve. Elders and deacons who work hard through long meetings, who write cards and remember anniversaries and birthdays. People in the pew who park farther away so that someone who needs a closer spot can park there. The power that Jesus grants us is power not to rule over or influence from afar, but to serve and love by coming near. Thank you for encouraging me and each other in our shared faith.

When I talk with God about the concerns I carry, I think my “Mother Zebedee” request for Jesus goes something like this: Jesus, I want you to assure me that whatever difficulty comes my way in this life will somehow be worth it in the end. This is more a cry of the heart and gut than of the head. I’m not really sure how I would determine what sacrifice or struggle toward service in this life was “worth it” in the next. So even there I have to trust Jesus’ sovereignty. I do think he wants to deepen my confidence in him without giving me the false hope of an equal exchange this particular sacrifice made for that particular glory.

In Jesus’ love and wisdom and long purpose, I think he wants to pave the way for an eternal glory that outweighs what we can see. I think he wants our response of faithfulness and courage in small and unlikely places, because it’s in some of those places that he does his best work.

The highest value of our lives is to know, enjoy, serve, and share the most famous Person in all of history. His book is a bestseller throughout the world. His name is literally written in the stars. His image is stamped on every human that we meet. He has given his life for us and paid a debt he did not owe because it was one we could not pay. So we make it our aim to serve him. We look at ourselves in the mirror, marveling at the mysterious, shimmering gift of this life and say to Jesus, “You saved me to serve. How would you like me to do that today?”

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