

# WORSHIP

Sermon | 10.21.2018



## Glory

By the Reverend Katherine Kerr

Mark 10:35-45

On Tuesday I had the opportunity to gather with others from our church to celebrate one of our own. Along with other remarkable church people, Martha Mallory received a Legacy Award from the Presbytery of Charlotte. Given annually, these awards recognize church members (of a certain age) in our presbytery who “act out their faith in service to the church and community.”

The awards ceremony is a luncheon to which each honoree is invited to bring a tableful of guests, and so we were in a room full of pretty incredible people. As he began the awards presentation, retired pastor Von Clemans mused that he was about to recognize and heap accolades on the very people who least wanted commendation for the things they had been doing. Around the room, and at our table, there were knowing chuckles. It was clear that each of the recipients was something like the one from First Pres – dedicated, committed, hardworking, and not so much interested in getting recognition for doing what comes naturally to them.

The honorees were men and women from all kinds of churches – large and small, urban, suburban and rural, who’d given of themselves year after year through service to the church. They were elders, deacons, Sunday school teachers, youth leaders, and volunteers in ministries from Presbyterian Women to Habitat for Humanity, worship leadership and preschool ministries. They went on youth mission trips and sang in choirs, landscaped church yards and sat by the bedsides of the sick and dying. They witnessed to Jesus Christ in their words and their deeds, and hearing their stories was nothing short of inspiring.

At the end of the luncheon, when I mentioned to Martha that I might talk about the experience in my sermon this morning, her response will surprise none of you who know her. She said, “don’t be making a big deal about this.” So of course, here I am, making a big deal of it. Because if you know her, you know some of what she has done in her many years of committed service to God through the ministries of FPC. It is a big deal, and it is worth celebrating.



But after saying that, she said something that really stuck with me. She said, “You know, I’ve always assumed that you get an award because you work hard at something. But everything I do has been a gift to me, and it hasn’t been hard.”

I believed her when she said that to me, but I also believe that there are many people in this world who might have a hard time believing her. Because the kind of selfless service that Martha and her fellow honorees exhibit is not what this world typically recognizes and appreciates. Giving of oneself in humble service, for the good of others, because of a belief that it is what God calls us to do, is not easy in the face of cultural pressures to grab it all for yourself- the praise, the status, the honor, the glory.

I appreciated that this all happened this week as I was reflecting on this morning’s passage. From now until the end of the year, we will be preaching from the lectionary- the collection of scripture lessons appointed for worship which rotates through a 3-year cycle and is used by protestant churches around the world. While we often choose sermon series to focus on particular aspects of life and of the church’s ministries, using the lectionary puts your preachers in conversation with passages that are chosen for us. And chances are good that you will know someone who also heard a sermon on this story at another church this morning.

This story of James and John and their request for positions of glory comes around every three years, and I have to confess that I have kind of a love-hate relationship with this passage. On the one hand, I appreciate how clear Jesus is here, and how graciously he deflects and redirects James and John when they come at him with their self-serving request. On the other hand, it’s far too easy for me to identify with the ambitious disciples who seek to capitalize on their relationship with Jesus and secure their own place in what they anticipate to be the ultimate seat of power.

These men – these all too human men – want what they don’t have. They want glory. But in asking for seats of honor next to Jesus, they reveal that they actually have no idea what true glory is.

Sometimes when I read this story, I imagine Jesus having a Princess Bride moment here, channeling his inner Inigo Montoya when James and John speak of glory, saying to them, “you keep using that word. I do not think it means what you think it means.”

What Jesus actually says, though, is kinder, and much more to the point. “You do not know what you are asking,” he tells his disciples. They think they want to be by Jesus’ side when he comes into his glory because they are thinking of glory in purely human terms- power and prestige, honor and accolades. But what Jesus knows that his disciples do not know is that his glory will not be anything like our human notions of glory, and that it will come at a very high cost.



John Calvin once called this passage “a bright mirror of human vanity,” and there’s something to that description. This request James and John make of Jesus, and the other disciples’ response to it reflects something that is at the heart of the human condition, though not something most of us particularly want to see. We humans are, at our very basest level, vain creatures. We are wired, it seems, to think of ourselves.

And that’s not entirely a bad thing- it is a natural instinct that leads to survival. All creatures need to have internal mechanisms that push them to find food and shelter, protection from the elements and from predators. If we don’t look out for ourselves in the very fundamental arenas of survival, there won’t be any “ourselves” left to do anything else.

But that isn’t all there is to human life, and a prevailing message in scripture, and a key part of all of Jesus’ teachings is that we humans need to find ways to overcome our selfish natures in order to live together in community as God has intended. From Adam and Eve and Cain and Abel, all the way to the apostles and the early church, scripture is full of teaching about the absolute necessity of thinking of others and not living solely for one’s own pleasure or glory.

We can know this, we can study scripture and seek to follow it with our lives, but still it is a hard lesson to learn. We live in a world that values individual accomplishment, a world in which the people who are considered great are usually not the ones known for humbling themselves and serving others.

In most cases, the ones who get the acclaim and praise, the ones society lifts up as successful and worthy of admiration are the ones who have put themselves first, and done whatever they needed to get ahead. As a culture, we typically laud success and accomplishment, and look questioningly at self-sacrifice and denial.

Of course, this is not always the case, and there are always great stories to be told about remarkable, selfless people who do incredible things to help others– police and firefighters, soldiers, missionaries, healthcare professionals, educators, and every day people- but sadly these “human interest” stories are more often the exception rather than the rule in our daily news.

Ours is a culture of achievement, of celebrity and acquisition and status. It tells us that glory is found in making a name for ourselves, getting to the front of the line, being at the top of our game. And we are easily fooled into thinking that if we just look hard enough, we’ll find a way to skip all the hard stuff and sail right to the good stuff.

One of the powerful ironies of this morning’s story is that, while James and John sought to sit at Jesus’ right hand and left hand when he came into his glory, the truth we know is that, at the end of his life on earth, Jesus had at his right and his left not loyal subjects but hardened criminals. And his resting place was not a throne, but a cross.

Jesus’ glory didn’t come in an earthly package. And we would all do well to take note of that



when we are tempted to chase after those things this world tells us to want.

Throughout history, people have sought to understand why God chose to take on flesh and live the humble life of an itinerant teacher. What made God, who has all the glory, set aside power and immortality to become human? And then, as a human, why on earth would God allow himself to be arrested, tortured and killed like a common criminal?

Beyond knowing that God did this to save us from our sins, we can't definitively say why it had to happen this way. But, as with most mysteries of our faith, scripture gives us some pretty strong clues.

And in Mark's gospel, those clues tell a powerful story about what it really means to be a disciple. A driving concern of this gospel is that its readers come away with a particular understanding of who Jesus is and what that means for his followers. And the Jesus that Mark presents is not just some great guy who happens to be a charismatic speaker who angers the powers that be and has to suffer the consequences. Jesus is the messiah, and every one of his works reveals the inbreaking of God's kingdom. He is a regular human being who is also God, and he reveals God's glory from within his humanity – all of it, even the really tough parts.

It's not easy for our human minds to process this- it wasn't easy for the disciples either, as shown by their confusion and bickering in this passage. But could it be that that was all by design? Could it be that instead of making it easy for us and appearing to every single human being in an individualized pillar of smoke and fire and laying out the five rules for a faithful life, God chose the harder path, taking on our form and living as us to acknowledge that human life is full of challenges and that even with faith, it is not always going to be easy?

Too often today, people look to Christian faith as providing some sort of quick answer to the troubles of life. There are plenty of preachers and writers out there who will tell you that if you just turn it all over to Jesus, then you won't have any more problems. It's called cheap grace, and it's plentiful in our world.

But if you read scripture, really read it, you will realize that it doesn't work that way. Yes, there is grace, and yes, our God is a God of love and forgiveness, but that doesn't mean that our lives are always going to be easy and that following Christ will bring us ease or privilege in this life.

As New Testament scholar Lamar Williamson puts it:

Getting right with God by coming to Jesus is not simply a basic factor in an orderly life. Discipleship will mean more trouble, not less. True discipleship is characterized by a costly pouring out of one's life for another, whether it be an aging parent, a difficult spouse, a special child, another member of the [community] who has unusual needs, or any person whose situation elicits neighborly service at personal cost. Jesus came to serve and to give his



life. Anyone who contemplates following Jesus without fear and trembling has not understood true discipleship, according to Mark.

Following Jesus isn't a recipe for an easy life. It doesn't guarantee success or health or glory. In fact, it is often quite the opposite. But if we really seek to live as God desires we live, that means we ought to always seek to put aside our own wants and needs and think of others in all that we do.

Few have articulated this truth better than Dr. Martin Luther King, who said:

**Everybody can be great...because anybody can serve. You don't have to have a college degree to serve. You don't have to make your subject and verb agree to serve. You only need a heart full of grace. A soul generated by love.**

**Thanks be to God. Amen.**

