

Twenty-First Sunday after Pentecost—Proper 24—Year B

Isaiah 53:4-12

Psalm 91:9-16

Hebrews 5:1-10

Mark 10:35-45

One of my favorite TV shows during the pandemic has been *Lucifer*. It's not as bad as it sounds. It revolves around several **angels** and **demons** and a whole host of **humans** all **struggling** to find their way. It's part detective **mystery**, part **romance**, part **drama**, part **comedy**, part **theology**. The **central figure** is the **fallen angel Lucifer Morningstar** who is a **sophisticated nightclub owner** who plays a mean **piano**, has a **great voice** with an **English accent**, and who also **consults with the LA police department** to solve murders. **Lucifer** has a *singular gift*—he can ask anybody, *“What is it that you truly desire?”* And those on the **receiving end** of that question, they simply **cannot resist** and with **utter, naked honesty** find themselves *revealing their deepest desire*. And that moment just after they've spoken is so **revealing** because they are **often stunned to know what it IS that they truly desire**.

Desire is a **strange** and **mysterious** thing, and it's at the **heart of today's gospel**.

James and **John** have approached **Jesus** and are **asking him to do for them whatever they ask of him**. That's *a little presumptive*, but **Jesus** rolls with it. *“What is it you want me to do for you?”* he says, *“What is it that you truly desire?”*

Without hesitation, **James** and **John** answer, *“Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory.”* That's shorthand for *“we want power.”* And we know it's about **power** because of where **Jesus** goes later in the passage when he talks about **Gentiles and their rulers and how their rulers exercise power and authority and lord it over them**. For **James** and **John**, to **sit at Jesus' right and left in glory** would be the **height of power**. Oh, how *seductive* it is.

And this is where **Jesus** would hit his **face palm bitmoji**, *“You don't know what you're asking guys.”* Then, **Jesus** drills down a little deeper with **James** and **John**: *“Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with? Do you have the power to drink that cup and receive that baptism?”*

“Totally Lord. We are able. We got this.”

“Well, you will. The cup that I drink you will drink; and with the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized. You don't know what you're asking for, but it'll come.”

And then **Jesus** continues, *“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.”* It's a curious turn of phrase. That sense of **preparation** is about **making ready**. The metaphor comes from an **ancient custom** of **sending people ahead of the king to level the roads and make them passable**. That would remind us of the **Isaiah** passage we hear every **Advent** about **the divine leveling that is done to make straight in the desert a highway for our God**. *You don't rocket to stardom and obtain seats next to Jesus*

in glory. Not even Jesus can speed up the process. One arrives at those seats in glory only after a whole lot of leveling has been done.

Now, when the ten other disciples hear about this proposed power grab, they become angry with James and John, downright indignant. Whether that's because *they were joining Jesus in a collective face palm*—I mean Jesus *had just told the twelve that the Son of Man was going to have to suffer and be killed, and after three days rise again*, so one can imagine the ten saying, “*Gosh, James and John, sort of an empathetic miss don't you think! Jesus tells us about his upcoming suffering, and you're jockeying for seats of power in glory?*”

OR, it is *also possible the ten were just plain jealous. Maybe they wanted those seats of power for themselves. Maybe they wanted twelve seats of power, instead of just two. Maybe they don't get it any more than James and John do.*

At this point, Jesus decides that some remedial teaching about leadership is in order: “You know that among the Gentiles, their rulers lord it over them. But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many, literally, to give his breath, his life, his soul to loosen the bonds that tie us up, to set us free.” And what Jesus is teaching about desire and power and leadership could not be more relevant to so many of our struggles today.

In Brené Brown's more recent work, she focuses on leadership, and through decades of research, she has come to understand that *power is not inherently good or bad, but what makes power dangerous is how it's used.* She goes on to describe different ways power is exercised¹.

She says that leaders who work from a **position of power over**:

1. **Believe that power is finite and use fear to protect and hoard power.**
2. **Leverage fear to divide, destabilize, and devalue decency**—decency [is] actually framed as a sign of weakness...
3. **Give people experiencing fear and uncertainty a sense of false certitude and safety based on ideology and nostalgia over facts.**
Being right is more important than getting it right.
4. **Give people someone to blame** for their discomfort—preferably someone who looks/acts/sounds different than they do.
5. **Maintain power over** by demonstrating an **ever-increasing capacity for cruelty**, including shaming and bullying—especially toward vulnerable populations.
6. **Frame constructs like personal rights and freedom to polarize and being in service of others is seen as weak.**
7. **Incite hatred and violence with persistent dehumanizing language and policies.**

She says that leaders who work from a **position of power with/to/within**:

1. **Believe that power becomes infinite and expands when shared** with others.

¹ Copyright © 2020 by Brené Brown, LLC | All rights reserved | brenebrown.com/daretolead.

2. **Leverage connection and empathy to unite and stabilize. Value decency as a function of self-respect and respect for others.**
3. **Offer people experiencing fear and uncertainty transparency and create learning cultures** based on critical thinking and evidence-based data from multiple perspectives.
Getting it right is more important than being right.
4. **Normalize discomfort and move away from shame and blame and toward accountability** and meaningful change.
5. **Frame leadership as a responsibility to be *in service of others* rather than *served by others*.**
6. **Frame rights and freedoms as privileges that are connected to responsibility to the larger community or organizational culture.**
7. **Center connection and humanity with empathy-driven agendas, policies and values.**

And let's be clear, don't go to the *binary* of "*conservative/liberal*" and *declare one good and the other bad*—leaders who exercise "**power over**" can be *found everywhere*, as can those who exercise "**power with/to/within**."

Brown gives us some language to frame these issues in terms that help us make sense of leaders, and frankly, *the failure of leadership, in our time, but Jesus distills it to its essence*—the exercise of power is *always in service of others*, NOT *that others may serve us*. For Jesus, the exercise of power is *always* steeped in comfort with discomfort, connection, humanity, empathy—qualities and capacities that we acquire through *suffering*.

I wish we could acquire these capacities in some other way, but it just doesn't work that way. The suffering servant of Isaiah this morning makes this clear. Jesus the great high priest of Hebrews who offers up prayers and supplications with loud cries and tears and who learns obedience through what he suffered makes this clear. And it's really interesting, this whole obedience thing in Hebrews—the root of the word "obedience" means "*to listen, to hear*." Hebrews tells us that the obedience that Jesus learns through his suffering makes him *perfect*. In the Greek, "**makes him complete**." There is something about suffering that expands our capacity to hear the depth of God's love, God's power, God's healing, God's presence.

For Jesus, *hearing at this level enables him* to become the source of eternal healing and wholeness, "salvation" in the English, for all who are able to *allow suffering to increase their capacity to listen to and hear Jesus' presence* in those hard places. And hearing and experiencing Jesus/God at this level makes us complete. It is this process that changes us, that transforms us, that moves us FROM those who seek *power over* TO those who understand that real power is with others and shared with others and arises from within where it's tempered in the crucible of suffering.

So, Jesus *starts with desire*, but *ends with power*, and honestly, we're *not super comfortable talking about either desire or power*, but these two are always intimately connected.

What is it that you truly desire? It's a great question to sit with. And as you wrestle with that question, do an inventory on your relationship with power. Do you seek it? Do you run from it? How do you exercise it? In service to others? That *they may serve you*? Is power for you

an infinite, ever-expanding resource, OR is it a zero-sum game, transactional, and scarce? For you, how is *power* all tied up in your *desire*? And how is *suffering* shaping you to steward power in the service of healing and wholeness?

Jesus doesn't give us the answers today, but he invites the questions, and then he points us in the direction that is worthy of eternity.

HE is the one going before us, leveling the ground, that we may find our way straight into the heart of God.

***What is it that you truly desire?* Jesus wants to know, and even if our answer is off the mark, he's willing to teach us and guide us and shape us until the power of love in service of others is the only thing that will *satisfy* our heart's desire. Amen.**

The Rev. Cynthia K. R. Banks
St. Luke's Episcopal Church, Boone, NC
October 17, 2021