

St. Thomas Episcopal Church, Sunnyvale, California

Sermon for the 22<sup>nd</sup> Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 24, Year B  
By Debie Thomas

*“Why be second when you can be first?”*

This is one of the mantras I grew up with. It was given to me by my well-meaning parents, who were brand-new immigrants to the United States when I was a little girl. Living far away from their family and friends back in India, struggling to make ends meet, baffled by American culture, and *anxious* – as all parents are – to make life safe and secure for their children.

In *my* parents’ minds, the best way to guarantee my safety was to prod me into every “inner circle” they could think of. I couldn’t just be a kid with decent grades – I needed to be the kid at the top of the honor roll. It wasn’t enough to be *well-liked* at school; it was safer and better to be the teacher’s pet. There was no point in accepting a “minor” role in the school musical if I could be the lead.

Surely, my parents thought, if our child can make herself indispensable, if she can win the affections of those in charge, and secure a place in their proximity, then *she’ll* be okay – and *we’ll* be okay. *All* of our immigrant struggles, all of the sacrifices we’ve made to settle into this new country – will be worth it.

For my part, I was – as Pastor Salying described herself in last Sunday’s sermon – a “good girl.” A kid who did as she was told. And so, I gave myself over to striving. Academic striving. Extracurricular striving. Religious and spiritual striving. With each passing year, I grew more and more determined to live out my parents’ mantra: *don’t be second when you can be first.*

For a while – I’ll be honest – there was something exhilarating about living this way. I *enjoyed* the compliments. I *cherished* being the favorite. And just as my parents predicted, I felt safer every time I earned a spot in a new inner circle.

Now, looking back, I know that I felt this way because power is beguiling. It holds out so many shiny promises, and chasing after it can become

addictive. Over time, it can take our self-worth captive, leading us to believe that only our accomplishments and accolades make us valuable.

And so, we strive harder and longer, wearing ourselves out to be liked. Because of course, this particular race has no finish line. There will *always* be another “inner circle” to break into. A higher grade, a more exclusive brand, a more prestigious job, a more illustrious zip code. There is no end to the misery we can inflict on ourselves and on each other when we decide to live our lives in pursuit of superlatives.

During this election season in particular, we know what the language of “greatness” is doing to our country. How it’s fomenting a culture of fear. How it’s entrenching an “us” versus “them” mentality that is hateful at its core. How it’s leading us to believe that the world operates on scarcity:

ie: If *I’m* going to be best, then *you* can’t be. The only way *I* can secure first place is if I cast *you* out of it. It can’t be helped; there just plain isn’t enough abundance to go around.

Into this milieu of toxic striving, our Gospel reading this morning speaks a profoundly counter-cultural word: You want to be first? Best? Greatest? Then become the servant of all. Stop racing, and allow God, the great upender of all human hierarchies –to turn your notions of power inside out.

As the story from Mark’s Gospel opens, Jesus is making his way to Jerusalem, and telling his disciples – for the *third* time – that he’s about to suffer and die. He knows that his friends are about to experience a terrible trauma, and he *needs* them to listen, to absorb what he’s saying, and to adjust their expectations accordingly.

But yet again, they don’t understand a word he’s saying. Instead – as we human beings are so prone to doing when we feel bewildered and out of our depth – they pivot, and make a mad dash for security.

Cue James and John, the two brothers Jesus calls “Sons of Thunder.”

They pull Jesus aside and say, “Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you. We want you to grant us the two best thrones in your kingdom – one at your right and one at your left. We don’t want to be *second* when you come into your glory. We want to be first.”

Is anyone else cringing? If I'm not careful, I can just write these two brothers off as the tackiest, most ridiculously brazen people in the New Testament. I can breathe a huge sigh of relief, and think: "Well, phew! Thank God *I'm* nothing like them!

Except, of course... *I am*.

I know what it's like to covet those thrones. To allow even my spiritual life to get tangled up in competition and entitlement. To *tell myself* that all I want is intimacy with Jesus, when in fact, I also want a long list of perks and privileges. Immunity from suffering. A steady stream of mountaintop experiences. A special chair at God's table – one that my family, friends, co-workers, or classmates might envy.

Astonishingly, Jesus does not respond to James and John with condemnation. He takes their request seriously, and engages them in a conversation that's full of love and tenderness.

So, I want to pause for a moment, and consider what James and John get *right* in this story. Because they *do* get some things right, and we should give credit where credit is due.

First, these two brothers place their full faith in the right person. Undaunted by Jesus's talk of suffering and death, they cling to the belief that their Teacher *will* prevail in the end. They have no idea what "resurrection" might look like, but still, they take Jesus at his word, and pin all of their hopes on who he is and what he's promised. I wonder if we can say the same.

Second, they long for the reign of God. They long for Jesus to be glorified so that the oppression and brokenness they see all around them will change. In other words, they *believe* that transformation is possible. They're not complacent about injustice; they expect Jesus's kingdom to remake the world.

Notice that Jesus doesn't criticize them for their ambitions. He doesn't say, "It's wrong of you to crave so much. It's sinful of you to strive for the best. Instead, he redirects their striving.

Perhaps the takeaway for us is that God *can and will* work with our desires. God *is pleased* when we desire more, seek more, hope more. What's lethal to the spiritual life is not our striving; it's our apathy. Desires can be redirected. Ambitions can be purified. Hopes can be refined.

But an unwillingness to care? A refusal to *want*? An insistence on cynicism? *These* are dead ends. These are the barriers that block us from grace and transformation.

Thirdly, James and John *ask*. They make their request to Jesus with hearts full of confidence. Is the request problematic? Yes. Is it borne of ignorance and immaturity? Yes. Are some of the motives behind the request selfish? Yes. *And yet*. They ask.

As I reflect on this, I'm reminded of how often I *don't* ask. How often I remain cautious and tepid in my prayers, not quite believing that God is actually *with* me and *for* me. A mature spirituality requires boldness. A willingness to get up in God's face with the brave unselfconsciousness of a child. *This* – the Sons of Thunder do quite well.

So, okay. These hotheaded brothers get some things right.

But they also get a key thing wrong, and that's where the heart of this week's Gospel lies. The easiest way to describe their error is to contrast the demand they make of Jesus with the question Jesus asks them in return. "Teacher," they say, "We want you to do for us whatever we ask of you."

In other words: "We've worked hard to be your followers, Lord, and it's time for you to give us what we deserve. What's in this for us?"

In return, Jesus simply asks the question he *always* asks: "What is it you want me to do *for you*?" Not, "Here's what *I* want," or "Here's what *I'm* entitled to," but rather, "How can I help? How might I serve you?"

What James and John fail to understand is that service in the realm of God is not a second-class means to a first-class end. Service *is* the end. In God's kingdom, glory is an exercise in subtraction.

Maybe, then, the fantasies of earth-shattering power we impose on God are just that — our own desperate fantasies. Maybe we cling to such a God because it's easier; it lets us off the hook.

Why bother getting involved in the world's sorrows if God can wave a magic wand and fix everything for us? Why lean into our own creativity, why respond to our own deep longings for justice, why call each other out to engage in the slow, risky work of renewing creation, if "glory" is only about grabbing the fanciest seats in the divine throne room, and putting our feet up? Why contemplate a Jesus who glories in serving his guests — refilling their water glasses, warming up their leftovers, preparing their rooms, washing their feet — if we can conjure up some combination of Superman and Santa Claus instead?

There is something tender and even heartbreaking about Jesus's response to James and John in this story. "You don't know what you're asking," he tells them. You don't know how harmful and self-defeating your notions of power and greatness really are. You have no idea how much *life* — rich, nourishing, gorgeous life — lies on the other side of the cup I'm about to drink, the baptism I'm about to undergo.

Beloved, I can't promise you the thrones you seek. But if you'll follow me into *this* baptism, this immersion into a new way of self-giving love and humble service, I will liberate you from the tyranny of endless competition.

I will deliver you from the need to perpetually hide your weaknesses and exaggerate your strengths in order to be loved.

I will release you to mature in a *downward* direction, towards the people who *can't* guarantee a lucrative return on your investment. Who have *no* social capital to wield on your behalf. Who will never bolster your resume, or earn you a raise, or win you more followers on Instagram. But who will, in every single instance, show you the face of God.

If you want to be great, then choose this. Choose what is truly best. The self-emptying Messiah. The Crucified Messiah. The servant Messiah.

After all, why be second... when we can be first?

**Amen.**