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An extraordinary minister of holy Communion holds the chalice during Communion at Sacred Heart Church, Dec. 10, 2023, in Prescott, Arizona. (OSV News/Bob Roller)



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Last week we observed the wealthy man who couldn't let himself be seduced into experiencing the Reigning of God. This week we watch disciples completely misconstrue Jesus' message. James and John, two of Jesus' closest companions, make the bold and self-serving request, "We want to share your glory by sitting at your right and left."

Jesus took them on directly, saying something like, "You don't have a clue about what you are asking for!" On his way to Jerusalem, Jesus knew that whatever his glory would be, it would come through passionate faithfulness to his Father and his mission. What an irony that the brothers asked to be at Jesus' right and left, the places ultimately occupied by two crucified criminals. To top it off, James and John asked for this right after Jesus had told the disciples that his mission would lead to his death.

With overconfidence and thickheadedness, the brothers assured Jesus that they could drink his cup and share in his baptism. Rather than contradict them, Jesus informed them that he had no control over glory. What a comedown! They asked, "Do whatever we ask of you," and he told them he was powerless. Even though they had been with him for a long time, even though he had told them three times over that he was headed toward suffering, messianic powerlessness was not part of their script for him.

Twenty-Ninth Sunday in Ordinary Time

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Isaiah 53:10-11

Psalm 33

Hebrews 4:14-16

Mark 10:35-45 or 10:42-45

Decades after the resurrection, when the Gospel writers began to reflect on how Jesus fit in their Jewish tradition, Isaiah's songs of a suffering servant offered the perfect and paradoxical answer. "The will of the Lord shall be accomplished through him ... through his suffering he shall bear their guilt." One approach to this reading teaches that Jesus had to die in order for humanity to be forgiven. This theory has a long history. Although we hear it in any number of hymns and homilies, it is far from definitive.

How was the will of God accomplished through Jesus' giving his life? First of all, Jesus' death and resurrection demonstrated and pledged that evil will never, ever have the final word.

Theologian James Alison suggests that Jesus' passing through death to a transformed life in God opened the possibility for his followers to act fearlessly. The revelation of Jesus' human life, his temptations and passion, his sharing in human weakness all the way to death, revealed that God can be trusted, even in the worst of circumstances.

Isaiah says that the servant "gives his life as an offering for sin." What if, instead of thinking Jesus made that offering to God, we consider that he made it for us to demonstrate that God can be trusted? Sin is nothing less than a rejection of God. Jesus' life proclaimed that God's love is more powerful than sin and death in all their expressions.

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Jesus told James and John that he was powerless to bestow glory and invited them to share his baptism and cup. Jesus demonstrated his glory in his experience of God working through him. By weaning them from their grandiose desires, Jesus wanted them to learn that if they clutched to hopes they could envision, they could not receive the unimaginable that God offers.

Jesus capped off his teaching saying that he "did not come to be served but to serve and give his life as a ransom for many." That's another way of saying that his glory had nothing to do with dominating, death-dealing power. We see his glory in his freedom to be for others. Those who hope to share that glory will find themselves in a great circle in which right and left make no difference because everyone is caught

up in the same energy of love.

Jesus' life and the history of Christianity make it clear that his message is subject to distortion and self-serving interpretations. Yet, Christianity has somehow survived its adherents. Jesus has always had followers who recognized and still bet their lives on the faith that weakness opens them to grace, that avoiding the traps of fear and control frees them to believe in the power of their baptism. They are willing to drink the cup of salvation with others in the body of Christ.

Today, in mid-October, Christ offers us the opportunity to grasp nothing except our Gospel freedom. That freedom gives us the glorious power to believe that division can be healed and that the fragility of dominance will be revealed. With the U.S. elections little more than two weeks away, we are called to serve, to do what we can to ransom people who are walking in darkness and to proclaim the good news in deed and word.

We know not what we ask, but we trust that faithfulness leads to an unimaginably wonderful future.

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