

Grace and peace to you from God Our Father and from the one who gave his live as a ransom for us all, Jesus Christ Our Lord, amen.

One of my favorite movies of all time is *The Christmas Story*. The story revolves around nine-year-old Ralphie. More than anything else in the world, Ralphie wanted a Red Ryder BB gun, but every time he mentioned it, he would be rebuffed. Ralphie asked his momma for the BB gun and she said, “No, Ralphie, you’ll shoot your eye out.” So Ralphie schemed and thought he could get his teacher to be his ally in the quest for his BB gun. So Ralphie wrote an essay extolling the virtues of the Red Ryder BB gun. His teacher returned it with a grade of C+ and with a note reading, “You’ll shoot your eye out.” So, Ralphie went to the department store Santa Claus and after telling Santa what he wanted, the Santa told him, “You’ll shoot your eye out, kid!” as he shoved poor Ralphie with his boot down a long slide. On Christmas morning Ralphie is scrambling to open the gifts under the tree. None of them is his treasured BB gun. Then his father points out a package that Ralphie had missed. Excitedly Ralphie opens the gift to find – you guessed it – his very own Red Ryder carbine-action 200-shot range model air rifle with a compass in the stock. It was exactly what Ralphie had dreamed of. So, he puts some BBs in the rifle, takes it outside and with his very first shot – gets a BB that bounces back and hits him in – his eyeglasses. Poor Ralphie! You have to be careful what you ask for.

Today's Gospel has a couple of Ralphies – a couple of brothers – who were asking for something it's clear they didn't completely understand. Out 2 Ralphies are James and John. They were also known as the sons of Zebedee. Their name literally means 'The Sons of Thunder'. In today's Gospel they ask Jesus for a very special privilege. "Jesus let us sit on your right and left hand when you enter your Kingdom...", they ask. Their question was based on a very common misunderstanding about Jesus. This was a time when the nation of Israel was under the military control of the Roman Empire. The people of Israel were looking for a powerful, savior to come on the scene to deliver them from Roman oppression. When Jesus arrived He wasn't recognized as the Messiah because He came as a meek and humble servant. The thought of the all-powerful deliverer was never far from the minds of the Jewish people, even from James and John as they asked Jesus for the privileged seats at this side.

What James and John didn't understand when they asked to be at Jesus' right and left in his glory was how God understands glory. The concept James and John attached to glory comes from the notion of a powerful warrior king. Glory to them was about conquest and squashing the enemy. It was about Israel becoming the center of the world. Glory was about ruling and authority and power. So, when the request to be at Jesus right and left was made – it was literally a request to be at the center of power. James and John – be careful what you ask for.

We all know people who have given up everything in order to get to the top. People who've given up their integrity, marriages, family, some even their very lives. For some people the lure of the next promotion; the chance at being next to the seat of power; being able to call the boss by his or her first name or many other chances for the brass ring is such a strong motivating force their desire to get to the top becomes an addiction. Left unattended, ambition easily becomes greed... They may not even really understand the cost of what they are pursuing. We all need to be careful what we ask for.

There was once a man by the name of Kenneth Lay. He grew up in Missouri, the son of a part-time Baptist preacher. His family was dirt poor, but Lay was ambitious. He managed to get accepted into the University of Missouri, where he earned his bachelor's degree. He went on from there to land a job with Exxon in Houston Texas. That led to a government position as a federal regulator. In no time, he was undersecretary of the Department of the Interior. He was a rising star. When the federal government deregulated energy, Lay returned to the private sector to form his own company. It was a high-tech corporation on the cutting edge. Kenneth and his company were great successes. Its stock soared. Investors could not get enough of it. Then it fizzled. Then it crashed. As it turned out, Lay and his executives were falsifying reports cooking the books, exaggerating earnings. Now Lay's friends would say He was a good man at heart.

Yet, something went wrong. Instead of enjoying the fruits of success, unhealthy ambition got the best of him. In the end, he was convicted of fraud and conspiracy. He would have gone to prison, but sadly he died of a heart attack awaiting his sentence. Make no mistake about this, there's a dark side to unbridled ambition. I'm sure you've heard of the company Kenneth founded. It was called Enron and it was a disaster, all because of the blind ambition of Kenneth Lay and the executives that ran the company.

When ambition drives us – glory is an incredible aphrodisiac. The lure of power is incredibly addictive. Mistakenly, James and John were also driven by this lure of power and authority. They wanted to be like Jesus – a good thing, but they didn't quite have a grasp of the big picture. Understanding what glory really is in the eyes of God and in the person of Jesus is the key to learning how to live our lives. Jesus was never lured by power. Scripture encourages us to look at our brother, Jesus, as the example. Saint Paul tells us: “Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. <sup>4</sup> Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others.”

(Philippians 2:3-4 NRSV)

Jesus was forced to sort out for his disciples what it meant to be one of his followers. What it means to be at his left and at his right. He had to correct the very flawed thinking of the disciples who cherished being in charge and being the

boss. He had to tell them it was the unbelievers who thought that way. It's the unbelievers who try to rule over their brothers and sisters. He called them to a much different and to a very, very high standard called servant-hood.

So, how is the Christian supposed to respond? Jesus invites us to imitate Him by becoming a servant, actually more correctly, by becoming a slave to all. Martin Luther said it this way, "A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none and a Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject of all, subject to all." Jesus said, "Even I came not to be served but to give my life as a ransom for many." Glory in the Kingdom of Christ is measured by the standard the Son of Man himself established as He gave His life for you and for me. So, when we, along with James and John aspire to greatness, are we sure we really know what we are asking for? Jesus didn't keep his definition of glory secret. He spoke openly and repeatedly concerning what was about to happen when he got to Jerusalem. He plainly told the disciples, "the Son of Man will be betrayed to the chief priests and teachers of the law. They will condemn him to death and will hand him over to the Gentiles, who will mock him and spit on him, flog him and kill him. Three days later he will rise."

The deep irony in this Gospel is that there were two individuals with Jesus when he entered into his glory. They were two thieves hanging on their own crosses right next to the King of Kings. James and John, Mel, what about you - are

you sure you want to be with Christ in the glory of the Kingdom of God? Can you drink of *this* cup? Can you be baptized with *this* baptism? James and John, confidently, if not naively, answered, “We can.” In the long run they did suffer as their Lord did. According to Church tradition, James was beheaded by Roman soldiers and John was exiled to the island of Patmos where he received a revelation from God which became the final Book of the Bible. In the short term however, at Gethsemane, on the night of Jesus’ betrayal and arrest, the cup was too bitter and the baptism too fiery and they ran as far away from Jesus as they could.

Friends, you need not drink of *that* cup; you need not be baptized with *that* baptism. Our Lord already endured the bitterness of that cup and survived the fire of that baptism. You see, glory to Christ was about the Cross. Glory to Christ was about winning our forgiveness and securing our place in heaven. Glory to Christ was about you. Our place on the top rung of the ladder of Christian success, for the ultimate glory, our salvation, has already been secured. In Christ we are already assured of the victory over Sin, death, and the devil. May you find glory in the Cross of Jesus Christ who died and was raised from the dead, all for you. May we all find our glory in serving God by serving our neighbors, by becoming as Luther put it, the dutiful servant of all. Amen.