

Receiving Angels, Crowns and Bach
[written in oral form]

Mark 10:35-45; Psalm 91:9-16
Proper 24, 21th Sunday after Pentecost, Year B

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James and John pulled Jesus aside, and asked, "We want you to say yes to our request."
This is the old, "Would you do me a favour" without clarifying what it is.
Jesus didn't fall for it, and replied, "Go on.....tell me what you want."
The two said, "When the time of glory arrives, we want to sit on your right and on your left."
Sitting in "glory" is an interesting concept. ???

Jesus responded by telling them they had no idea what it means / what it takes to remain next to Jesus..... all the way,..... and besides, Jesus noted that he didn't hand out such favours or rewards.

When the other ten heard about the conversation, they were livid,... ..not because they thought the two were out of line, but rather because James and John asked first. Likely, they were thinking the same thing.

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The Gospel of Mark makes the disciples look foolish to help us get it.

Jesus addressed them all, and pointed out that they were thinking like outsiders, and not as God thinks. Jesus said that in the secular world those in positions of power often use their power over others in selfish and destructive ways. This can include bullying, sexual and social abuse, and keeping the weaker weak.

Jesus repeated what they should have known by now: that greatness is being a servant / a slave for all. Adding, "The son of man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many." Remember that "a".

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With our Anabaptist glasses on we respond by declaring, "Silly disciples, can't you see? Didn't you read about the suffering servant in Isaiah 53? Don't you understand that **first** is serving, as Jesus did. Perhaps, we have concluded that serving others is the way to please God / the path to glory.

A more conservative view would consider our theology 'salvation by works.'
With their tinted glasses, they would read this passage and declare, "Jesus was the perfect human. No person can be like him, and so it is a good thing he died for us so we can be saved."
And, they would underline the word "ransom" in their Bible, thinking it meant a blood payment for salvation.

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The better translation for "ransom" was '**on behalf of**', and it is in the **present tense**. In other words, Jesus is living his life as a model in order to teach and show others.  
Moreover, Jesus implored the disciples, and all readers, to follow him / to be as Jesus was. Therefore, the "A" ransom reveals that all followers of Christ are ransoming their lives, too. Jesus is just one of many.  
Besides, if the word ransom meant a payment to free us as a hostage, then who is cruelly holding us hostage? GOD?

I don't think so. Or,....maybe it's something else?

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Nevertheless, sometimes I wonder if it is more important for us to get our doctrine right than it is to understand.

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Psalm 91 contains the delightful message about God sending angels to guard over us. I love that imagery--of angels watching surrounding and protecting.

Even so, with analytical glasses, I did some research on angels, this past week.

I learned that angels don't have wings.

And, then it hit me: it doesn't matter, ...and we need not alter our children's costumes for a Christmas drama.

Moreover, I don't have a theology for angels, yet I have prayed that God send angels to protect my daughters.

Our glasses don't need to be magnifying glasses in order to understand.

What matters is that God loves and cares enough to help us and watch over us.

It doesn't really matter if God sends angelic, supernatural beings, a friendly neighbour or a good book to comfort us.

What matters is that God has loving compassion for you and me.

It's not about angels, although I think the notion of angels is pretty cool.

Accordingly, understanding / seeing clearly is not about being dutiful or merely mimicking Jesus in form. That's impersonal legalism.

Too often we measure Jesus, even God, by the paradigm we've constructed. In essence, we have a mould and make Jesus fit into it.

James and John thought once the "dues" were paid / once the ugly slave duties were completed, then it would be glory time.

**They failed to see the glory in the now / in the present tense.**

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They assumed that Jesus was a portal to heaven.

They failed to see that Jesus was the manifestation of God's love, compassion and grace for each person, and **that** love appears as a servant.

Jesus was NOT asking the disciples to change their actions to mimic a servant in order to be rewarded.

Jesus was prompting them to see a new reality where hearts and lives are changed, not just routines and destinations.

The disciples had trouble seeing that, and I bet they couldn't see angels either  
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The following is a true story told by a seminary colleague of mine.
Here is his story told in his words:

In grade nine, we elected a king and queen for our end of the year school dance. My friends and I voted for our friend John to be our king. He was a handsome, popular and fun guy.

But then, to poke fun at the girls in our class and to add some colour to the occasion, we stuffed the ballot box with votes for Theresa, a perceived, overweight, unattractive wallflower of a girl.

Midway through the dance the chaperons stopped the music to announce the Class King and Queen. We clapped loud when John's name was announced.

When they announced that Theresa was our Class Queen we roared with delight.

Theresa, not knowing it was a joke, also jumped for joy, adding to our sick pleasure.

Then the lights dimmed, the slow music began, and a spotlight beckoned the traditional dance of the Class King and Queen.

In that moment, John panicked, and said to us, "Dance with Theresa? I'd never hear the end of it. I've got to save myself."

And in a flash, John bolted for the exit and was not seen for the rest of the evening.

Even limited thinking grade nine boys know when a joke has gone badly. We were stunned, frozen in time.

Then out of the darkness stepped Chet, the handsome quarterback of the football team and one of the other nominees for Class King.

Chet offered his hand to Theresa, led her into the spotlight, where they danced and talked like Cinderella and Prince Charming through several songs in the evening.

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Theresa changed that night. She became happier and more confident.

But, a lot of us standing in the shadows changed that night too. We learned who the real king of our class was, and what a king looks like.

We learned that the crown belongs on the head of those who worry less about saving themselves, and more about saving others.

And, the crown belonged to Teresa, too, because she did not run away,...AND...with the touch of grace.....her life was changed.

The crown is something given. It is NOT something earned or taken.

It is a confirmation, and not an achievement.

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Much too often, we fail to recognize those who wear and polish their own , self adorned crown. Sadly, it is the victims who, years later, reveal the charade,.....and the rest of us are shocked or in disbelief.

We can usually identify stereotypical bullies--the aggressive, threatening thug.

Yet, we must do a far better job of recognizing those **admired** leaders who are actually deceivers and who are abusing their power.

Let us take a cue from Jesus, and Avoid praising and admiring those who Thrive in glory and adulation.

In addition, we must see that groups of people, including good individuals, can be a bully, such as with my colleague's story.

A culture can have systemic bullying. A church, too, can be abusive to others,.....when values are askew and grace is diminished.

The seeds of enabling bullying / abuse grow when people are exclusive, intolerant, judgmental,.....and ...have a misplaced devotion to praising achievement and power.

In essence, when justice, love and grace are absent, abuse can thrive.

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All life is precious. Each and every person is precious.

When we are blinded by status and power, then abuse will go unseen.

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Teresa was not seen as precious and wonderful.

Pressuring others to conform **or ...** the need to fit in can be fodder for abuse, too.

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Parents: please do not yield when your children plead "But, everyone has one" or "Everyone is doing it." Don't enable that message of conformity to a lesser god.

And, children/teens: don't let yourselves be controlled by others.

You are precious and wonderful.

You don't need to have what others have or to surrender to peer pressure. Be yourself... because you're the only one in the world who can do that. The world needs you to be you.

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The beauty, the preciousness of life is in the now... in the moment,.. in the truth, and.... in the surrender to expecting God to send angels.

All glorified deeds and labels and titles distract more than they help.

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I'll close with another true story. Because of social media, you may have heard this story. Regardless, it is worth hearing it again.

A man sat at a metro station / a subway station in Washington DC, and started to play the violin; it was a cold January morning.

He played six Bach pieces for about 45 minutes.

During that time, since it was rush hour, it was calculated that over a thousand people went through the station, most of them on their way to work.

Three minutes went by, and a middle aged man noticed there was a musician playing. He slowed his pace and stopped for a few seconds and then hurried up to meet his schedule.

A minute later, the violinist received his first dollar tip: a woman threw the money in his open violin case without stopping. She continued to walk by.

A few minutes later, someone leaned against the wall to listen to him, but the man looked at his watch and started to walk again. Clearly he was late for work.

The one who paid the most attention was a 3 year old boy. His mother was pulling him along; even though hurried by his mother, the children stopped to look and listen to the violinist. Finally the mother pulled hard, and the child continued to walk turning his head all the time. This action was repeated by several other children. All the parents, without exception, forced them to move on.

In the 45 minutes the musician played, only 6 people stopped and stayed for a while. About 20 gave him money, but continued to walk their normal pace. He collected \$32. When he finished playing and silence took over, no one noticed it. No one applauded, nor was there any recognition.

No one knew this, but the violinist was Joshua Bell, one of the best musicians in the world. He played one of the most intricate pieces ever written with a violin worth 3.5 million dollars.

Two days before his playing in the subway, Joshua Bell sold out at a theatre in Boston and the seats averaged over \$100 each.

This is a true story.

Joshua Bell playing incognito in the metro station was organized by the Washington Post, in 2009, as part of an social experiment about perception, taste and priorities of people. The purpose was to learn if that in a commonplace environment, at an inappropriate hour: Do we perceive beauty? Do we stop to appreciate it?

Do we recognize the talent in an unexpected context?

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When we look for the divine, the beautiful, the preciousness in all things,.... in each and every person,.....then

we will not enable or tolerate abuse, and...

We will not tolerate injustice and destruction.

When we look for the divine, the beautiful, the preciousness in all things,.... in each and every person,.... then the weak and powerless will be crowned, angels will hover over us, and we will pause and laugh with God..... because we finally get it.

Until we arrive at that point of understanding, we are slaves to other masters.