



THE UNITED CHURCH OF CANADA

CANADIAN MEMORIAL CHURCH
& CENTRE FOR PEACE

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Mark 10:35-45

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20th Sunday after Pentecost

“A Sacred Trust”

It was, as they say, a teachable moment. Brothers James and John pull Jesus aside out of earshot from the other disciples. He has just dropped the bombshell on them that he's going to end up on hanging from a cross and sooner than rather than later. The sons of Thunder, as they were known, display spectacularly bad taste in response. They jump right past the empathy for Jesus, or their own feelings for that matter, and treat Jesus' tragic destiny as an opportune moment to address their own ambitions.

First they ask Jesus to grant whatever it is they want, no questions asked. Jesus doesn't take the bait. He asks them what they want. Nothing much really – only to sit with Jesus in his glory, one at his right hand and one at his left hand, after he's dead. In this exchange, we get a foretaste of what is to come in the politics of the early church. In Harvey Cox's soon to be published book, the *Future of Faith*, he tells the history of these power moves in the first few centuries of the Christian church. It would make a great Hollywood drama - the slow, but steady devolution from deep spiritual faith that isn't about who gets the seat of honour, to a belief-based orthodoxy that's all about securing that seat – apostolic succession, heresy trials, church tribunals, etc.

But Jesus doesn't seem terribly alarmed by their strategic maneuver. They

want power. Who doesn't, each in our own way? But were they prepared to take the heat associated with leadership? The way Jesus put it was: “are you prepared to drink from the cup that I drink, and be baptized with the same baptism?” (Mark 10: 38). Well, they have their eye on the prize these two. They can't see any problem as far as that goes.

Jesus, perhaps smiling to himself, and maybe even appreciating their sense of initiative, doesn't challenge their spiritual bravado. Instead he goes to the heart of the matter, which I see as trust.

(Who will) 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 (10:40)."

In other words, let it go. This is an invitation to trust God. There are some things that we just can't engineer into existence. Jesus isn't talking about predestination – as though the future has already been literally predetermined. Why take any initiative or have any drive in life if this is the case? I hear in his response an invitation to live “as though” there was at work in the universe a Hidden Wholeness, a divine impulse that is aimed at increased beauty, truth, and goodness. Entrust the future to this power that we call God. Jesus is inviting John and James to set their initiative, their drive, and their

strategic capacity within the context of this Hidden Wholeness. In other words, James and John, you're just going to have to learn to trust God on this one.

Trusting God is a little scarier than believing in God, wouldn't you say? Believing in God involves an intellectual assertion, a rational proposition that somewhere out there is a God. Trust in God, conversely, introduces an element of surrender and risk. I can believe in God without entrusting my life to God.

This doesn't entail abandoning our initiative; it doesn't mean passively waiting for "God" to make it all better; it doesn't mean relieving ourselves of responsibility for our lives and the lives of others. But trusting God does mean that we let all of our human ingenuity, creativity, resilience, and strategic capacity – all that good stuff – serve a larger purpose than me. It means entrusting ourselves, day in day out, moment by moment, in an unconditional way, to Reality – the Heart of God – even though it is beyond our capacity to fully describe, rationally understand, or control.

Harnessing the Ego for God's Work

James and John make a common human error. They try and control outcomes. This is how the small self operates in them. They desire to go down in history as Jesus' favourites. They believe that Jesus is going to be ruler of the universe one day, and they want a piece of the action. They want assurance that their place is secure in eternity. You gotta hand it to them. With the sons of Thunder it's go big or go home. They are leaving nothing to chance. Essentially, they desire to be God or as close to God as possible – and to enjoy all of the attendant privileges. What they don't realize is their desire to

manipulate Jesus, and control the outcome – an eternal seat on the Heavenly Board of Directors – is born of fear, not trust. They confuse unconditional surrender to the Hidden Wholeness of the Universe with their own preconceived ideas of success.

This outcome is not born of their soul's desire and certainly not their divine Self. Ego always wants control, always wants more, always wants greater assurance and more insurance; ego's role is to defend our hearts from the unexpected, uncontrollable exigencies of life. Thank God for our egos, because without them defending, protecting, and standing guard over us, our poor hearts might not make it to adulthood.

But to meet Jesus, or any genuine spiritual teacher, is to come face to face with the most terrifying proposition our egos will ever face – to trust God and surrender your attachment to outcomes. Relieve your ego, for just a moment of its vigilant project of defending your heart – and enter the Kin(g)dom of God. Here's a poem, *Avowal*, by Denise Levertov that many will recognize. It describes unconditional surrender:

As swimmers dare
to lie face to the sky
and water bears them,
as hawks rest upon air
and air sustains them,
so would I learn to attain
freefall, and float

into Creator Spirit's deep embrace,
 knowing that no effort earns
 that all-surrounding grace.

Would James and John have asked for that secret meeting with Jesus if they knew what it was to "float into Creator's deep embrace knowing that no effort earns that all-surrounding grace?"

There is, of course, a paradox lurking – always a paradox in this spiritual life, for paradox is the house of Spirit. The paradox is this: once we have come some way in learning to trust Creator Spirit's deep embrace – what I have called the Hidden Wholeness or the Heart of God – then a new future and a course of action may actually reveal itself. And this new future is going to require all of the effort you can muster – all your strategy, resilience, intelligence, foresight, and passion. There *is* work to do, after all, but it's work that is in response to grace. The nature of work changes as well. It becomes soul work. For this work the soul recruits the energy of the ego in service of a higher purpose.

The Emerging Church

Now, let's apply this to what I call the "emerging" church. When I speak of the "emerging church" I am referring to this paradoxical dynamic I have just described. As a community of faith we walk together the path of unconditional surrender – the path of trust – we wait upon grace for our future to be revealed to us. Then, together we rally all of our God-given strength and gifts to realize that future. We don't engineer anything into existence that is born of insecurity or fear – for this is the work of our smaller,

personal selves. Rather, through practices and processes that help us function from trust, we discover what is next for us, and then lean into realizing that future.

Dwelling within the paradox of deep trust in God, we discover that there is no need to re-create the wheel; rather, in surrender we ask God to show us the wheel may be used in service of a higher purpose. We are not called to bring forth the greatest expression of the church. Rather, we simply need to pay close attention to what God has already provided, and nurture the sacred seedlings in our midst. Together, we envisioned a future for ourselves through the Imagine Canadian Memorial process. But we don't leave behind our foundational principles of ministry anywhere, anytime, by anybody. We build on this commitment. We don't leave behind gift-based ministry. We carry it forward. We don't toss our proud legacy of generosity for mission. We roll it into who we are becoming.

When church is firing on all cylinders it is a project of "allowing", not manufacturing. The future of Canadian Memorial will emerge out of the soil of what already exists. This is what I mean by the emerging church; the community of faith – the programs, the governance, the relationships, the worship, the outreach, the celebration – that emerges from the soil of a community committed to radical trust.

Occasionally I get some feedback about our Purpose at CMUC indicating that there may be some confusion about the paradox of surrender. When we say that God calls us to teach and practice evolutionary Christian spirituality, some experience this as an unpleasant burden to

“evolve”. On top of all the rest of life’s responsibilities – raising the children, making enough money to pay the bills and save a little for retirement, keeping the body from totally deteriorating – now we *must* evolve! It feels exhausting.

But think about this: evolution is already a condition of existence. We arrived with this evolutionary impulse coursing through us the moment we exited our mother’s womb. Actually, within our mother’s womb we recapitulated the whole evolutionary history of the universe and life on this planet in 9 months! And we didn’t have to try for one second! It just happened to us and through us.

In other words, it’s all grace. A one year old naturally wants to learn how to walk and talk – coaxing may help, but the impulse is already present. A toddler wants to learn to run. Just try and stop him! When I see parents down at the beach putting a toddler on a leash I shudder. It’s like trying to put a leash on Niagara Falls. Similarly, given the proper conditions a child is like a sponge. She wants to soak up everything she can about this world. This urge to evolve is the air we breathe, the thermals we ride, and the water that sustains us. It has nothing to do with trying harder. It’s more like releasing into it.

Or to change the metaphor, it’s more like *awakening* to it. And when we awaken to this evolutionary impulse flowing through the entire universe, our minds, our bodies, our relationships, and our systems we have a choice to make. Will we consciously surrender into it, lean back into it, spread our wings to its updraft? Spiritual evolution is built into

the fabric of the universe every bit as much as biological and psychological evolution. Spiritual practice then, is simply a matter of learning how to cooperate with this evolutionary sacred grace. But whatever the practices may be, they are all *responses* to a pre-existing grace. An evolutionary spirituality is not about making anything happen. It’s about consciously cooperating with what is the most real thing about this universe – it’s evolving – and releasing into a sacred covenant of trust with God.

That’s what we’re about at CMUC – consciously cooperating with, and releasing into this evolutionary grace, because we believe that it is of God.

Jesus doesn’t shame James and John for where they are in their spiritual understanding. (The other disciples, mind you, were a little miffed.) But Jesus asks them to examine their understanding of leadership. They were conformed to the Roman understanding of power as domination over others. But, says Jesus, if you want to be great in the Kin(g)dom of God, you must *serve* others and serve a higher purpose. Servanthood is the quickest way to reign in the ego and help it to find its true purpose in the service of something other than security. Like Bob Dylan wrote in that post-conversion song of his, *You’re Going to Have to Serve Somebody*:

You may be a preacher with your spiritual pride,

You may be a city councilman taking bribes on the side,

You may be workin' in a barbershop, you

may know how to cut hair,

You may be somebody's mistress, may be
somebody's heir

But you're gonna have to serve somebody,

Yes indeed, you're gonna have to serve
somebody,

Well, it may be the devil or it may be the
Lord

But you're gonna have to serve somebody.

The devil here is a personification
of fear itself. We're either going to serve
fear or trust God. What the sons of
Thunder didn't get was that they were

already servants. Ironically, in their desire
to attain absolute power, they were serving
Fear.

And here's the ultimate paradox
that James and John needed to be
reminded of: all the time that they spent
strategizing how to get a seat at the right
hand of God, they were already there. It's
not, in the first place, about our climb up
to be with God. It's about God's climb
down to be with us wherever we're at.
And if they wanted proof that God was
already seated beside them, all they ever
had to do was to open their eyes and see
their beloved leader sitting right beside
them. All that's asked of any of us is to
surrender and serve our God.