

True North

Mark 10:35-45

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

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On Wednesday morning, I spent three hours on Zoom for part one of a Boundaries training workshop with a group of Mennonite Church Alberta and Mennonite Church Saskatchewan pastors.

I doubt it will surprise you to learn that this would not be high on my list of ways to spend a Wednesday morning.

But there have sadly been more than a few examples in the last few years of pastors behaving badly lately, whether it's the high-profile stories that make the news or all the lower-profile stories that don't.

So, there we were on Wednesday morning, talking about power. About the various forms of power and the ways it is misused by pastors. About "up-power" and "down power" and power granted to us by virtue of our role, and personal power, and charismatic power, and situational power and power imbalances, etc, etc.

At one point, our presenter told us that her task was not to give us "the right answer" for every situation we might encounter as pastors and how power ought to be employed or relinquished. Rather, she said, she was giving us a "compass" to help navigate the terrain.

Someone asked her, "well, given your metaphor of a compass, what would you say is your 'true north?'" Her answer surprised me a little. She said "self-awareness."

I want you to hold that question and that answer in your head as we move forward this morning.

As luck (or Providence!) would have it, in our gospel text for this week, Jesus is also talking about power.

Let's set the scene. Jesus' crucifixion is looming. In the verses immediately preceding today's text, Jesus has, for the third time, explicitly predicted his death.

We are going up to Jerusalem," he said, "and the Son of Man will be delivered over to the chief priests and the 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." (Mark 10:32-34).

This is the clearest and most detailed prediction of Jesus' suffering and death so far.

In a quite spectacular exercise in missing the point, James and John take this opportunity to ask Jesus if they can have positions of power and honour in Jesus' coming kingdom.

They have left everything to follow Jesus, after all. They've puzzled over his strange teaching, witnessed his miracles, observed his power and authority over the powers of evil.

And now they are trembling with anticipation at the triumph that is surely coming. They are primed to rule with Jesus. They want a front row seat (and a bit of power) when the action starts.

"Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory" (Mark 10:37).

Jesus responds to their request in an odd way (we're getting used to odd by now): "You don't know what you are asking... Can you drink the cup I am going to drink?"

James and John answer (rather optimistically and naively): "Yes, of course we can."

Then Jesus says something even stranger:

The cup that I drink you will drink; and with the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized; but to 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.

I've often puzzled over that last bit. Ok, so who gets to sit on the right and the left? If not James and John, then who? Don't leave us hanging, Jesus! Who are "those for whom it has been prepared?"

It's interesting to consider Jesus' response in its immediate context.

In the very next chapter of Mark's gospel, Jesus enters the city of Jerusalem as Israel's ironic king, riding on a donkey, kicking into motion events that will come to a head with his crucifixion five days later.

This is Jesus' coronation. Not a crown of glory but a crown of thorns. Not a triumphant display of divine power, but a "weak" expression of self-emptying and sacrifice. Not a throne but a Roman cross.

So, if the cross is Jesus "coming in glory," who is at his left and his right?

Well, it's a pair of criminals. Perhaps they were armed revolutionaries. Perhaps they were anti-Rome demonstrators. All we really know is that they were there, like Jesus, as object lessons of the power and brutality of the empire and the futility of resistance.

These were the ones that were granted the positions that James and John were so convinced they wanted. These were the ones who were present at Jesus' "coronation," who occupied the places to his left and his right when his kingdom finally came.

Many of Jesus' followers—then and now—are preoccupied with trying to secure benefits and prizes and rewards from God, scrambling to use Jesus to clamber up the religious ladder or the political ladder or whatever other ladder we figure he can help us climb.

And Jesus sighs and shakes his head. You don't know what you're asking... or what you're doing... or what you're hoping for... or much of anything about this kingdom that I am bringing.

And he's right.

At any rate, the other ten disciples hear about what James and John have been up to and they are, understandably, angry.

I think it would be a stretch to assume that their anger is particularly righteous or that it comes out of any deep understanding of the nature of Jesus' kingdom. They're probably just annoyed that James and John are doing some advanced lobbying for positions that they have their eye on, too.

And in response to all this jealousy and anger and confused squabbling over power, Jesus sits everyone down for a little chat.

And he says four very important words.

Not so among you.

Look around, Jesus says. You see how things work all around you. You see how power games are played out there in the world (and, sadly, we must add, far too often in the church).

You see how desperately people crave power and status and admiration. You see all the ways in which people manipulate others and situations to gain these things.

You see how things work. Not so among you.

Instead....

Whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave.

As Christians, our primary conviction is that every one of our neighbours bears the image of God, and that our posture toward them is to that of Christ's posture to us.

Ok, so that's our story. These themes of servanthood, the first being last, etc., are not new. We've seen them emerging in various ways throughout our tour through Mark this fall.

So, I want to go in a bit of a different direction with the remainder of my sermon.

The question I have been wrestling with all week—the question that I struggled with as I read the text before and after attending my Boundaries training workshop, with all of its fancy terminology about power—is a rather simple one.

How do people change?

Specifically, how do we become the kinds of people who increasingly ask the *right* questions and have the *right* assumptions about Jesus and his kingdom?

The most obvious thing to say at the outset is: not easily.

James and John had presumably heard the Sermon on the Mount before this uninspiring episode. They had listened as Jesus proclaimed his Beatitudes. They had seen Jesus in action, healing, teaching, upending norms, hanging out with sinners and tax-collectors and sinners, blessing children and holding them up as examples, annoying those in positions of power.

They knew that priorities look different in the kingdom of God. And still, there they were, jostling for very this-worldly-looking forms of power and honour.

Despite all that they had seen and heard, their priorities and assumptions and expectations seem more or less unchanged.

The same is true for all the pastors who fail, publicly or privately, who abuse power for their own gain, who exploit other people for their own gratification.

It's likely not news to them that Jesus is not a fan of this behaviour. I would submit that their failures are not due to the fact that they didn't take the right workshops or do enough boundaries training.

The same is true, on some level for all of us.

More often than not, it's not that we don't *know* the right thing, that it's mere ignorance that is preventing us from doing the good that we ought to do or avoiding the bad that we ought not to do.

Knowing what is right, whether we're talking about if or how power should be employed or restrained or reconfigured or any other moral issue, *is not* and *has never been* sufficient for actually doing it.

This is Paul's lament in Romans 7:

⁵ I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do... For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. ¹⁹ For I do not do the good I want to do, but the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing...

²¹ So I find this law at work: Although I want to do good, evil is right there with me.

²² For in my inner being I delight in God's law; ²³ but I see another law at work in me, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within me.

Paul's experience is one that I suspect most of us recognize all too well, if only in the privacy of our own hearts and minds.

So, how do we change?

This brings me back to the title of my sermon. "True north." We should start by clarifying our terms. What does this mean?

In the world of navigation, true north is, "the direction towards the top of the earth along an imaginary line at an angle of 90° to the equator."

Used metaphorically, it is, as one definition I came across this week put it, "your fixed point in a spinning world that helps you stay on track, representing who you are at your deepest level.

My Boundaries facilitator on Wednesday said that "self-awareness" was her true north. I paused on that. Is it?

I think that self-awareness is hugely important. I think all leaders should strive to be ever more self-aware. I think *everyone* should be moving in this direction. A world where more people are aware of their limitations and tendencies, where more people honestly wrestle with power dynamics and how they are used and abused would almost certainly be a better one.

So, hooray for Boundaries and hooray for self-awareness.

But self-awareness is not true north. Jesus is.

This is such a pastor-y, Sunday-school-ish, cliché answer, I know. It's hard to go wrong when you say that Jesus is the answer to any question.

But it's true. For the Christian, true north cannot be ourselves, even at our most self-aware. It must be Jesus.

Now, I can already hear at least one objection. How does saying true north is Jesus change anything when it comes to how human beings change?

Could not this passage be read as Jesus offering a bit of moral instruction around power and leadership, the equivalent of a first century Boundaries workshop?

Ok, greatness consists in servanthood and not lording power over people. Stop being like the Gentiles. Reconfigure how you understand power and how it works in the kingdom of God. Go get busy doing that.

We're still left with this little problem of human nature and our inability to consistently act on what we know to be good and true.

But Jesus goes on, as Jesus does. I think the last verse is the most crucial one in this whole passage.

For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve and to give his life a ransom for many."

Ultimately, we will not reconfigure our ideas and practices around power by becoming ever more self-aware, helpful though this may be.

Paul was very self-aware! I think Romans 7 is among the most self-aware, psychologically astute passages in all of Scripture.

Paul ends that passage with these words:

What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body that is subject to death? ²⁵ Thanks be to God, who delivers me through Jesus Christ our Lord!

The Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.

I think it is this vision of a God who would give himself away for our rescue, who sees us as we are and loves us still, who promises to never leave or forsake us, that has the capacity to change how we approach power (or any other thing).

We are changed on the deepest, truest, and most lasting level not by getting more and better information, data, instructions, whatever, again, helpful though this may be.

The deep change we long for comes only by having our loves and our desires changed, by having our vision of what it means to be human radically transformed by the God who became human and laid down his life for us.

Jesus could have just wagged a moral figure at James and John and left it at “not so among you.”

But he didn’t stop there. He said, “Look at me. I’ve come not to be served, not to exercise power in the usual ways, but to serve *and to give my life to rescue you!*”

A chapter later in Mark’s gospel, Jesus enters Jerusalem on donkey. Days later, he will hang upon a cross, giving his life as a ransom for you, for me, for many.

Jesus did not come to make basically good people better; he came to make dead people alive.

He did not come primarily to give us a few more moral tools in our toolbox; he came to rescue us.

Basically good people do not need to be ransomed. Those who know the good they ought to do but just can’t do it... do.

Our true north, as Christians, is God on a cross, dying in our place, offering forgiveness, offering salvation, offering life in its fullness.

The cross is where we are confronted decisively with the truth about who God is and who we are.

If we do not shrink away from either, if we allow the love displayed at Calvary to penetrate the deepest corners of our lives, I think we will be changed.

We will not become perfect, obviously. This side of eternity, that option is not on the table.

But we will become more like him in all kinds of ways, including how we relate to power and honour and status and influence every other thing in this world that we so easily corrupt and misuse.

Increasingly, the things we value and the reasons we value them will come to more closely resemble Jesus.

Thanks be to God for the cross of Jesus Christ, our true north, which changes everything.

Amen.

