

## The Great Reframe

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Scriptures: Isaiah 53:4–12; Psalm 91; Hebrews 4:12–16; Mark 10:35–45

When was the last time you had a complete change of perspective? Maybe it was due to new information that you had not heard before or a new outlook, perhaps from a friend who comes from a different walk of life from you. I think we all go through a change like this when we leave the households of our parents and start paying for our own stuff. Our taste can get a lot less particular really quickly, can't it?

That's a paradigm shift. I remember the moment I decided to view school the same way I viewed summer camp. (I went to summer camp a lot growing up as a kid.) And I started to view my classes like activities at summer camp - opportunities to learn and to do my best, but carrying less weight than the pressure-ridden way I had viewed my class work before that point. And, barring one chemistry class that first year and a few stressful assignments, I found my work did not suffer in terms of quality while my stress level was greatly reduced. I had shifted my paradigm for the better.

We have one such paradigm shift in our Gospel reading today, a paradigm shift we've been hinting at over the last several weeks but comes to a head in the request Jesus receives from the Sons of Thunder, James and John. They have put in their work and they want what is coming to them. "Teacher, we want you to do for us

whatever we ask of you." Man, talk about shooting your shot! They went right for one of the oldest tricks in the handbook for children who want to get one over on their parents, right behind asking dad for something after mom has said no. "Say you'll do whatever I want."

Jesus sees through this of course and asks the brothers to elaborate. "Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory." It's a big ask. They had undoubtedly heard their teacher's words that one day the first would be last and the last would be first, and they had had enough of last place. They wanted to see some return on their investment.

They of course don't know what they are asking. And we'll get to that later, but first, let's look at the paradigm shift Jesus has been teaching his disciples and makes even more clear here. He has brought children before the disciples and told them that they must become like them in order to enter the kingdom of heaven. And now he brings these forceful words, drawing in the other 10 disciples to make sure they hear this too, those other ten disciples, some of whom may be cross they weren't the ones to ask James' and John's question first:

"You know that those who are considered rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. But it shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all."

That's a paradigm shift. I was once at a gathering of pastors and the speaker that had been appointed was sharing about dealing with difficult employer/employee relationships in the church. He told the story of a senior pastor who told one of his employees that this employee's job was not any number of items in a written job description, but to make him, the senior pastor, happy. I sat there in a little bit of shocked silence because this was shared as an example of things working well! I am sure this presenter's intentions were good, but if I had more courage, I would have stood up and said, "The rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. But it shall not be so among you." I am grateful to serve in a church both locally and beyond that has received this word from Jesus, because so often we don't get this right even in the church! "It shall not be so among you." It was difficult for the disciples, and Lord have mercy, it is difficult for all of us. But this is the way of the Kingdom!

And it is about to get harder. What does Jesus say next? (verse 45) "For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." If we are truly committed to following Jesus in the Kingdom wisdom of the first being last and the last being first, we must be willing to follow him even unto submission to death. You can't get more "least" than laying down your life. In laying down his life, Jesus shows us that he is serious about this "servant of all" stuff.

And this is where it all seems to fall apart. Because death doesn't seem like the sort of end we'd expect for those we consider to be among the first in God's book. Jesus is

saying to James and John and to you and me that while we want to hold the place of honor and privilege, he is going to ask us to die.

It seems like a losing strategy. When you put death on the table, that's the end of the game. Winners don't die. They live. We want, James and John want to be on the winning side of that equation. I was talking with Matt Spainhour earlier this week about this gospel passage and he reminded me that it was James and John who were the disciples who asked Jesus if he wanted them to call down fire on a Samaritan village that had rejected him, so they were comfortable with dealing out death, but they weren't ready to embrace it themselves. Jesus says that they may indeed get the places beside him, but those places happen to be crosses. So often we prefer the place of authority over the place of service and suffering.

And again, logically speaking, that is because this is a losing strategy. It's seemingly baked into the very nature of things. It's the fittest ones that survive. We presuppose that survival is the goal and so we fight to be first, in resources, in position, in honor. Hang on to what you can because eventually, someone is going to try and take it away.

But this resistance to death, this resistance to the Jesus way of the last being first and the first being last, it all hangs on one important assumption - that death is the end. We fight to survive, because survival is all we've got. That's what the world has over us. Death. Sin's wages, the scriptures call it.

So the paradigm shift that Jesus offers us is not just to serve instead of seek to be served. It's to embrace laying down our lives in the hope of the life to come.

Jesus will say elsewhere that unless a seed falls to the ground and dies the new growth of the plant will not come. That's the kingdom wisdom that is in opposition to a worldly wisdom that assumes death is the end and organizes living in the putting off of that death by any means necessary. "The last will be first" is the first paradigm shift. Resurrection is the second.

Fr. Greg reminded us last week to remember the finitude of our lives and to find encouragement in the reality of the Resurrection. Not only does the resurrection give us the courage to face our natural deaths in peace, but it frees us to lay down our lives daily in big and in small ways.

There are Christians who are called to lay down their lives for their faith in martyrdom. It is a fate that has existed since the book of Acts and continues to this day in many parts of the world. But this is not the only opportunity for us to lay down our lives for the sake of the Kingdom. Laying down your life could look like taking a less lucrative path in business because it is ethical and good for others. Laying down your life could look like long hours spent at the bedside of a sick parent or friend. Laying down your life can look like putting aside your career goals for a time for the good of your family. Laying down your life could look like having the hard conversation you know you need to have but don't want to. We may indeed be called

to die for our faith, and if we are, it will be the daily laying down of our life and picking up of our cross that will prepare us to make that decision.

And we can only do so with an eye on Resurrection on the other side. Consider what the Psalmist says for us this morning. Recall all the dangers listed in verses 3 to 7: snares, pestilence, darkness, arrows, wasting away, forces that cause thousands around us to be destroyed. Yes, I think that just about covers it. But hear the promise of Resurrection (verse 14):

“Because he holds fast to me in love, I will deliver him;

I will protect him, because he knows my name.

When he calls to me, I will answer him;

I will be with him in trouble;

I will rescue him and honor him.

With long life I will satisfy him

and show him my salvation.”

Again, the accusation may come that this is an empty promise. One needs to simply point to the suffering of the righteous before and after Jesus to bring this point into question. Does God redeem the suffering of his people? Is there something on the other side of laying down your life?

We would not have a satisfactory answer to that question unless Jesus had shown us the way. Many of us are quite familiar with our reading from Isaiah 53, the Suffering Servant of God. This passage points us to the sufferings of Jesus on the cross. He was crushed, he was pierced, he was despised and rejected; he did not open his mouth like a sheep before its shearers. But don't miss this among the final verses:

Yet it was the will of the Lord to crush him;

he has put him to grief;

when his soul makes an offering for guilt,

**he shall see his offspring; he shall prolong his days;**

**the will of the Lord shall prosper in his hand.**

Out of the anguish of his soul **he shall see and be satisfied;**

by his knowledge shall the righteous one, my servant,

make many to be accounted righteous,

and he shall bear their iniquities.

**Therefore I will divide him a portion with the many,**

**and he shall divide the spoil with the strong,**

because he poured out his soul to death

and was numbered with the transgressors;

Jesus, though he dies, he lives. He wins. He defeats death by submitting himself to it. And that is the wisdom of the kingdom: the way to unlock the shackles of death is to submit to it. The way you release yourself from the fear of death is in the knowledge that it has no power over you. The wisdom of the world, the winner-take-all cycle that is killing all of us, is based on the faulty premise that death has the final say.

So for James and John, and you and me, as we come to Jesus asking him to give us the spot of honor right beside him, there is good, bad, and the best news for us this morning. The good news is that we indeed do have a place at his side. The bad news is that place is a cross, a call to die daily. But the best news, the gospel news, is that in submitting even unto death, death loses all of its sting.

I read this week a quote from John Perkins, the civil rights leader and pastor, who wrote about how it was in his suffering and indeed almost dying, that God changed his heart toward those who were persecuting him. He says: "That was the night God gave me a real compassion for whites—the night those Mississippi police officers beat me almost to death."<sup>1</sup> An attitude like that doesn't make sense without the Resurrection.

And so that is what it comes down to. Do we believe in the Resurrection? Because everything hangs on it.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://relevantmagazine.com/life5/relationships/2643-defeating-hate/>. Referenced in Rutledge, Fleming. *The Undoing of Death*, 16.



Resurrection is written into the Universe, at a level that transcends the conventional wisdom of grasping at every advantage in life we can squeeze. Fleming Rutledge writes about this deeper wisdom in her sermon “The Undoing of Death,” connecting Jesus’ power over the grave all the way back to the mighty work of Creation:

“...dust we are and to dust we shall return. There we remain unless there is an intervention from beyond this world order. Only a Power greater than that of Death can countermand that strict arrest.”

She continues: “When Jesus Christ the Son of God steps forward to the door of Lazarus’ tomb and speaks, it is the same voice that was heard at Creation: ‘Let there be light!’ *and there was light*. Did the light have any choice in the matter?”<sup>2</sup>

The one who calls us to lay down our lives can deliver on his promise to give us new life on the other side of suffering, not just because he has been there himself, but because he is the one who gave us life in the first place. He is the one upon whom all our hopes hang, and as we confess every week at the end of the Creed, he will deliver on that promise.

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<sup>2</sup> Rutledge, 278.