
Who is the Greatest?

A sermon by Canon Cathy Zappa
Proper 20 – Year B

My family likes to celebrate the occasional miracle of all five of us being home by watching some evening TV together. I always look forward to this relaxing family time. But, as soon as we all make our way to the living room, my vision of peace flies out the window, as the sofa becomes the site of an intense, sometimes violent battle.

When the kids were younger, it was a battle for the seat closest to me. Now it's a battle for the seat farthest away—and closest to an end table. The situation usually escalates, as one of the kids stretches out his legs across two cushions, and another protests by plopping down on those outstretched legs. Which leads to more squabbling and sometimes hitting. "I was there first!" "Scoot your feet over!" "That's my spot!" Inevitably, the third child needs to get in on it too: "You're taking up too much room! Be quiet! You're so annoying!"

Now, you're probably thinking that we must have a really small sofa. But that's just it! We don't! This whole battle is waged over a portion of a rather large sectional sofa, most of which remains invitingly vacant the whole time.

Which always leaves me wondering: Don't they see how much space there is? Why's it such a big deal to give in, and make room for someone else? Don't they get tired of this same old battle?

But before I dismiss my kids' competition with amusement, or frustration, I have to admit that I sort of get where they're coming from, even as an adult. I, too, get jealous and evaluate what I have by what others have. I, too, imagine that certain resources, like love and respect, are scarce; and that there might not be enough for me. I, too, need reassurance that I matter, and have a place in this family, or community.

Indeed, it seems like this anxious way of thinking become a hallmark of our culture today. Advertisers feed on our insecurities and comparisons with one another. Politicians build themselves up by tearing each other down. Colleagues fight over recognition and resources. Neighbors secretly relish the shortcomings of others, and are quick to murmur about who's getting a divorce, who's in rehab, who has—scandal of all scandals—really just let their yard go. We've even institutionalized gossip, with an entire industry that dishes up the scandals and failures of celebrities' personal lives.

This isn't a new, or uniquely American, phenomenon. In fact, we can trace envy, and selfish ambition and competition, all the way back to Adam and Eve—and through other families and communities in the Bible—and into the early church. We find them even in Jesus' own inner circle—among his first disciples, who heard everything he said about humility and service and selflessness, but didn't seem to quite get it. Or really believe it.

As our lectionary has been leading us through the Gospel of Mark, we've watched with the disciples as Jesus heals people and exorcises demons, and then consorts with sinners and outcasts. We've heard Peter confess that Jesus is the Messiah, and then refuse to accept all that this means. We've heard about Jesus' glorious transfiguration, and shaken our heads at the disciples' misguided urge to memorialize it.

Naturally, they're attracted by Jesus' displays of power and glory and righteousness, and secretly hope that some of it will spill over onto them—that following Jesus will confirm their greatness, and specialness, and value. Which is why they keep

missing the point of what Jesus is telling and showing them: that he's come to serve—that he's going to suffer, and be rejected and betrayed and executed—and that he'll rise again. This doesn't make any sense to them, and isn't the kind of power and ministry they're looking for.

But rather than admit their dismay and ignorance, they turn back to the ways of this world, which they *do* understand. They compete. They argue about who's the greatest. Who's closest to Jesus. Who has logged the most exorcisms this week.

They've been around Jesus long enough to know better, of course. They know they're supposed to love and serve others. They know they're supposed to deny themselves and take up their cross and surrender their lives for the sake of the gospel. And so they're embarrassed that they've been caught, yet again, missing the point, worrying about themselves, and succumbing to envy and pride and selfish ambition.

Envy and selfish ambition—they run painfully deep, don't they? Perhaps because they're rooted in insecurity and fear. It's just so awfully hard to shake the conviction that we build ourselves up by tearing others down, or that we need to build ourselves up to begin with. It's just so awfully hard to trust that there really is enough for everyone; that we really are chosen and loved; and that we aren't diminished by others' being chosen and loved, too.

And yet, isn't that exactly what our Christian faith tells us? That God created us, and loves us and provides for us—that to God, every single hair on our head matters; that we are all God's children, and that God has more than enough love and mercy to go around.

But, when we act out of our fear and envy and insecurity, we suggest that we don't really believe this after all: that maybe we've settled instead for a "me-first" god: a god made in our image—who plays by the rules of this world, and pits us against each other, in an economy of scarcity. And that's to deny the God we know in Christ: the God who gives up power to be with us and to bear our suffering—the God who *is* the greatest, but who humbles himself to serve and make room for others, and calls us to do the same.

We believe, Lord—help our unbelief!

Lord, help us live our faith in you, not just with our words, but also with our actions and thoughts and feelings. And help us trust in your redemption and abundant love, and the spaciousness of your kingdom.