### “Lord It Over” by S. Finlan, at First Church

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**Hebrews 5:2, 5–6**

2Jesus is able to deal gently with the ignorant and wayward, since he himself is subject to weakness. . . .

5 So also Christ did not glorify himself in becoming a high priest, but was appointed by the one who said to him, “You are my Son, today I have begotten you”; 6as he says also in another place, “You are a priest for ever, according to the order of Melchizedek.”

**Mark 10:35–43**

35 James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came forward to him and said to him, “Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you.” 36 And he said to them, “What is it you want me to do for you?” 37 And they said to him, “Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory.” 38 But Jesus said to them, “You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?” 39 They replied, “We are able.” Then Jesus said to them, “The cup that I drink you will drink; and with the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized; 40 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.”

41 When the ten heard this, they began to be angry with James and John. 42 So Jesus called them and said to them, “You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. 43 But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant.”

We probably imagine James and John to be pretty dynamic and enthusiastic leaders. These brothers, whom Jesus nicknames the “sons of Thunder” (Mark 3:17), were two of the first four people chosen by Jesus. Along with Peter, they were with Jesus at the Transfiguration and in Gethsemane, so they were part of the inner circle.

Well, these guys also consider themselves to be pretty dynamic. They have been talking together, and now they ask Jesus to let them be first and second in power, when Jesus comes into “glory,” which they think means an earthly kingdom. They really don’t know what they’re asking, and what might come with being known as a leader in the Jesus movement.

Jesus reminds them that *he* will have to suffer a kind of “baptism,” drink a kind of “cup.” They don’t understand his metaphors. They still have not been able to wrap their minds around what Jesus has warned them of three times: that he is going to be seized by the scribes and priests, condemned, and handed over to the Gentiles (Mark 8:31; 9:31; 10:33). So the “cup” refers to martyrdom. One of these brothers, James, would indeed be martyred, not long after Jesus’ own death. The other brother, John, would live to be just over a hundred years old and would write some of the books of the New Testament.

But on this occasion, they really are out of line. Yet Jesus corrects them fairly gently. As Hebrews says, he “is able to deal gently with the ignorant and wayward” (5:2). I’m glad for that!

Jesus takes the opportunity to give an important moral lesson about leadership. He reminds them of what they already know, that Gentile rulers are bossy. They “lord it over” others. “But it is not so among you,” he says, “but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your *servant*” (10:43). James and John, then, would need to get used to serving *others*, if they would be great. He re-directs them to a more spiritual way.

Christian leaders are to be unselfish, loving, and humble. This, of course, is quite counter-intuitive. It goes against the way of the world. But it *is* possible, and it is *necessary*, for a genuinely Christian leader.

The teaching of Jesus really offers *another way* from the way of the world, a wholly different system of ethics and interaction. Both for disciples and leaders, Jesus affirms kindness, service, honesty, hope, and humility—and did I mention HOPE?! These are worthy aspirations; they have real meaning and permanent value.

Jesus’ way is utterly irreconcilable is with any wholly cynical or pessimistic philosophy. Jesus rejects the worldly idea that leaders will always be bossy and bullying. That is *not* the way it is to be within the Jesus fellowship. Further, within the fellowship, there is not to be any kind of class system. The Apostle Paul says: “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus” (Gal 3:28). This is not to deny our male or female characteristics, but to prevent such distinctions from defining hierarchy and division.

The same principle applies to any attempt to claim privileged status because of time spent with Jesus in the flesh. James and John get no inside track, except in a purely spiritual way. They *did* get the inside track in receiving some teaching, but not in getting access to power.

Christian faith offers a new way of living, a new standard of ethics, a new ideal of human nobility. The church was a remarkable and original human society for at least its first four hundred years. Men and women, rich and poor, Jew and Gentile interacted in ways that were not occurring outside the church. They learned to “bear one another’s burdens” (Gal 6:2); to “outdo one another in showing honor” (Rom 12:10), as Paul instructed them to do.

The behaviors modeled within the early church would eventually start penetrating civil society, but they couldn’t simply be *imposed* on society. Christianity is not a political philosophy, although it contains the leaven that can *season* society, *sweeten* public discourse, and *uplift* all social life. Jesus compared the kingdom of God to a woman kneading leaven into dough (Matt 13:33). Well, it takes *time* for *all* of the dough to be leavened, and it takes time for Christian character and values to penetrate society.

Abraham Lincoln said that our “bonds of affection” and the “chords of memory will swell again when touched . . . by the better angels of our nature.” The teaching and the example of Jesus certainly call forth our better nature. Do not accept cynical and despairing views as *your* philosophy. We may do well to be alert, cautious, sometimes even suspicious, but we are not supposed to despair of human nature, not when Jesus called himself “the Son of Man,” when he said that we could “hear the word, hold it fast in an honest and *good heart*, and bear fruit with patient endurance” (Luke 8:15).

We *can* take the Word into our heart! We take in the good, and we can *manifest* good! As with any planting, we may have to wait a season to experience the harvest. But we go forward on faith, knowing we will eventually bear fruits of the spirit.

I’m going to hold fast to *that* fact! I’m going to resist cynicism and snobbery, alike! James and John were nothing special. And yet, they were—and we are—*all* special, if we take in what God gives us!

I have focused on two pitfalls to avoid: *snobbery* or ambition, as seen in the brothers’ quest for power; and *cynicism*, the idea that leaders will always be mean and bossy, and that people will always be selfish. Christianity affirms a different value system. To be great you must be a server of others. That doesn’t mean you barge into people’s lives and tell them what they ought to change. It means you walk *beside* them and *care* about what they are going through.

John, in his old age, would become quite good at this. When he was in his 90s and could barely speak or walk, he would be carried in front of the congregation at Ephesus, and would say, “little children, love one another.” (Jerome, *Commentary on Galatians* 6.10).

We, too, can overcome divisiveness. Even with all our differences, we can lift our eyes to a higher path while building unity of purpose. God is our Father, and we are all welcome to participate in God’s family.