

Ann Bonner-Stewart

Saint Mary's Episcopal Church, Newton, MA

Proper 24B; Mark 10:35-45

20 October 2024

Once there was a little boy named Max. One day he dresses up in a wolf suit and behaves so badly that he gets sent to his room with no supper. Max's bedroom transforms into a jungle, and he sails in his own private boat across the water to where the wild things are. Max stares unblinkingly at the wild things' terrible eyes, ignoring their terrible claws and terrible roars and their terrible teeth, and they, the wild things, in return, make Max king of all the wild things.

Today in the reading from the Gospel according to Mark, two of the disciples are seeking to be in a position of power, a little like Max is on the island. James and John, who along with Peter are often depicted as Jesus' inner circle, approach Jesus. They almost seem to be trying to entrap him. James and John say, "Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you." It's a setup. I think of this as the equivalent of a child coming forward to ask, "Will you always love me no matter what?" before then admitting that something very breakable is somehow now broken. Right, so James and John are trying to butter Jesus up. James and John ask Jesus for positions of power, one to sit at his right hand, one to sit on his left.

The request from James and John becomes odder when we know that the last thing that Jesus said right before was this: "See, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be handed over to the chief priests and the scribes, and they will condemn him to death; they will mock him, and spit upon him, and flog him, and kill him; and after three days he will rise again." This is the third time in Mark that Jesus has said something like this. He's been trying to tell them that things are about to go sideways for awhile now. Either James and John haven't been listening or paying attention. Or perhaps they have been paying attention and they want to ensure their status after Jesus is gone. Or perhaps they have been paying attention and just have no way to make sense of what he's saying so they ignore it. No matter the intention, Jesus tells James and John they don't know what they're asking for and that the position is not really his to give anyhow.

This passage is part of Jesus' larger mission of frankness and perhaps even self-correction. He is trying to be more blunt about the nature of discipleship. In the first half of Mark, up to

Mark 8, the biggest problem seems to be that too many people want to talk to Jesus so they can't sleep, eat, or rest, which, granted, is a genuine problem, and also a bit of these diamond shoes are too tight echoings. Many are incredibly enthusiastic about Jesus, mostly for what he can do for them in terms of healing, and very few, if anyone, understands him. So the last month, in church, as we have been reading through and past the halfway point in Mark, Jesus begins to talk more and more bluntly, letting his disciples, and thus us, know that following him does not always lead to rewards that are easy to recognize by everyone, like power, prestige, or position. Jesus will sometimes, honestly, often, ask us to reevaluate, perhaps even to unlearn, what we have absorbed from the larger culture about what it means to be great. It may not give you what you think it will, he says. This is implied in last week's Gospel, too, the famous/infamous camel through the eye of the needle one; the young man who is rich seems to have everything and yet he is still seeking more. Jesus asks us to decenter power, prestige, and position, to send them down the list in terms of what we are seeking. Greatness might just be unimpressive, Jesus says, which is counterintuitive.

The other ten disciples hear about John's and James' request, and they get mad. Most interpreters seem to think they're mad because they didn't think to ask for themselves. Jesus then very frankly reminds the disciples that following him is not about power or position but that being great, according to Jesus, means to be a servant. To be great, according to Jesus, is to serve.

In *Where the Wild Things are*, after the wild rumpus, which apparently involves a lot of dancing, tree climbing, and hootin' and hollerin', Max decides, despite his power, despite his position, despite the fact that he's surrounded by other wild things who worship him, that he is lonely and that he wants to be "where someone loves him best of all." So Max gives up the power, gives up the prestige, gives up the position of being king of the wild things. He chooses to sail back across the sea and to go where "people loved him the best." Rather mundane compared to being king, isn't it?

God is like the mother in *Where the Wild Things Are*. The mother is only a voice in the story, and yet without her presence the story would be different— maybe there wouldn't even be a story, because without being sent to his room, would Max visit the other wild things? She sends Max to his room when he gets out of hand, somewhat like Jesus telling us things we may not want to hear, like maybe greatness is different than we have been conditioned to think. The wild things like Max because they fear him, and because of what they think he can do for them, while the mother in the story provides comfort and loves Max because he is her child. Max's mom serves the meal for him, off stage, though it is not attributed to her, the same way we experience the beauty of this world— a big belly laugh, a gorgeous

sunshine or sunset– they are just there– we may or may not attribute them to the divine. Max knows that because, in the end, he wants to return to where he is best loved. And he does, And when he returns, in the corner of his room, Max finds his supper served, waiting for him, his supper which he had supposedly been denied: a glass of milk, some soup, and a sandwich with the crusts cut off. It's not impressive in any way, shape, or form. But it's nourishing. It's comforting. It's what Max needs. The very last words in the book are “and it was still hot.” Greatness might just be unimpressive.

I'll close with some of the lyrics to the beautiful prayer that will be our offertory anthem today: *God, teach me how to live and how to serve. With my ears may I hear. With my eyes may I see. With my lips may I speak. May your word be heard through me. Thus as I live each day may love sustain the will to serve. Amen.*