

The Throne or the Cross ([Mark 10:32-45](#); [Isaiah 53:4-12](#); [Hebrews 5:1-10](#))

by Cate Florenz

Grace and peace to you, beloved, who do not have to ask for a seat with God.

Have you ever tailored your resume to apply for a job you really wanted? There's a subtle trick to using just the right keywords to make it clear that the experience you have is perfectly aligned with the skillset a company needs. If the job advertisement says, "We need a professional with 10 years' experience in multi-channel marketing," you will be sure your resume says, "More than 11 years' experience in multi-channel marketing." You might even add on awards you've won or certifications you've earned for an extra boost. If you can, you'll get a letter of reference from a prestigious person in the field. As a society we are learning to say just the right thing to take the next step, to climb the ladder that leads to more authority and control, better pay, better benefits, more autonomy and job satisfaction. We seem to want to sit in the CEO's chair, the modern-day king's throne. I do not think there is anything inherently wrong with taking this tack in pursuit of one's one vocation, job, and life. We live in a world where self-advocacy is important and necessary.

This is kind of what James and John are doing, *but* not in the business realm but in the spiritual one. And here they are on shaky ground. They want Jesus to write them a letter of recommendation, so to speak, to catapult them to the top, alongside Jesus. **But Jesus is not going to the top; Jesus is going to the cross.**

And that is the main difference between a Theology of Glory and a Theology of the Cross. Martin Luther was the one to coin the phrase "Theology [or theologian] of the Cross." For him, theology always *starts* at the cross. What we know of God is what God reveals to us, and the ultimate revelation of Godself is in Jesus on the cross. And it is nothing like what we expect.

A theology of glory is one that conjures images of Christ on a throne, Christ victorious after battle, Christ all-powerful, Christ as ruler. These are not unfamiliar images, but I think Luther would say they are misguided. We might, and some do, think of Jesus' work on the cross as transactional – his life for our sins in some kind of great cosmic accounting – but this was also anathema to Luther, who insisted that the cross is *not* a payment made in an economic exchange, *not* a part of a philosophical system of justice.

What we see on the cross is not a transaction and it's not a victory. It is weakness and humility and failure. And that is what we know of God, not that God, in Jesus, would go to the cross with an ace up his sleeve in some kind of cosmic double-cross, but that Jesus, for you and for me, would go to the cross without an ace up his sleeve, without a way out, he would go anyway. The weakness isn't a trick, it just is. The cross isn't a roundabout way to the throne of glory, it's just a cross of human evil that reveals the weakness of a God whose way of being is inconceivable to us. It's foolishness. It's what Paul means in 1 Corinthians when he says that "foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength."

When James and John ask to be at Jesus' right and left, they're thinking of a throne, and Jesus is thinking of the cross. You may recall that there *are* men to Jesus' right and left when he is crucified, criminals condemned to the same fate, so it makes sense to me that Jesus says to James and John, "You do not know what you are asking."

Jesus asks James and John if they are willing to suffer – to drink the cup that he will drink and be baptized with the same baptism – and they say yes. I wonder if they say that because they imagine there's a throne at the end. I wonder if they would be as willing to suffer if there were no glory in it at all. Jesus tries to warn them that death lies ahead, and that they go forward not knowing how everything will come out in the end. Perhaps when Jesus says, "to sit at my right hand or at my left is not mine to grant," he's also saying, "I don't know how this ends. I just know that greatness, glory, do not lie where you think they do."

Jesus says that "whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant." That is where greatness lies. He does not say that serving others is a roundabout way to greatness; that servants will get a special letter of recommendation later; or that he has an ace up his sleeve or a trick that's going to turn servants into kings. He means that serving is greatness. He is calling us to participate in this upside-down world where glory is not what we are headed for. So what are we headed for?

It's possible to read today's Gospel lesson alongside the Isaiah and Hebrews readings and wonder whether suffering is what we're headed for and wonder what God requires of us. By suggesting that Jesus' life is a ransom, the writer of Mark is connecting Jesus' death to the suffering servant of Isaiah and to the scapegoat ritual of Leviticus where an animal would be sacrificed to atone for human sin. However, the biblical witness on the whole does not seem to indicate that individual human suffering is required, redemptive, or in any way fairly distributed. The lesson does not seem to be that suffering makes a person holy, or even that God *required* Jesus to suffer. Rather the theology of the cross tells us that Jesus – that God – knows suffering, entered into humanity, emptied Godself into this world to teach us what love looks like. A God who required suffering or payment isn't a God I'd be super excited about following. But a God who enters into humanity, a God whom humans feared and killed and who, somehow, still lives and calls us to live and love, that's a God I can get excited about.

And this is the God who in Jesus says to James and John, we are not headed for glory. We are headed to an entirely different, upside-down type of kingdom where we are called to service rather than greatness as we might imagine it. And we will find that the greatness is in the service, that the glory is in the love.

My mom used to say that character is who you are in the dark. Your character is revealed by how you act when nobody is watching, particularly toward people who have nothing to offer you. Jesus calls us to serve in love even though nobody will ever ask to see our spiritual resumes. We are not climbing a ladder to God, and it's a good thing, because we wouldn't get there. The cross tells us of a God who comes down the ladder to us, who enters fully into the human experience and who teaches us, or tries to teach us, to love as if there's nothing in it for us. Because love is its own reward, and perhaps that is why the kind of greatness Jesus leads us to is so unexpected.

There remains a question about how well we can really do this – really love, really serve, really not worry about our spiritual resumes and who's going to sit with God in the end. James and John, and you and I, will continue to struggle with serving each other and loving each other in the foolish and selfless way we are called to. But thanks be to God, Jesus is considerably more reliable. Jesus loves enough for all of us, "for the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life." He came not to be served – that is, there's nothing we could possibly do for Jesus, no service we could provide or payment we could make. There is no way or need to no way to beef up our resumes to compete for a position in Jesus' kingdom because we have each already been called beloved members of God's family. We don't need to compete for a position because we already have one. Thanks be to God.