

# I Call Shotgun!

By: Meagan McLaughlin

October 17, 2021. In today's sermon, Pastor Meagan invites us to continue to seek the will of God, not in security or honor as our egos so easily lean into, but in the ways we can uniquely serve, giving of ourselves to God, to others, and to the world.

Reading: [Mark 10:35-45](#)

\*\*\* Transcript \*\*\*

The Spirit continues to blow where she will, leading us onward in our journey from what has been to what will be. And I think we just got a little taste of maybe what will be. In this week's gospel, the disciples' journey with Jesus continues. We hear James and John ask Jesus to assign them to the best seats in the glory to come, and I imagine people edging their way into chairs at a table — perhaps, on this day when we're celebrating Luke, and Emmy, and Anna, the communion table — everyone pushing, perhaps politely, perhaps rudely, to get the best seat, closest to their favorite food, or maybe their favorite person at the table.

But also, I can't help but go back to being the oldest sister with two younger brothers heading out to the car. Inevitably one of them would shout it out: "I call shotgun!" Has anyone else heard that phrase? I don't know if this way of claiming the front passenger seat was a Minnesota thing, or a '70s thing, or a McLaughlin family thing, but I can tell you that I rarely got the front seat unless my parents intervened. And if the whole family was in the car together, my spot as the oldest-but-shortest of the kids was in the middle of the back, where my feet rested on the "hump" and my brothers could take turns squishing me as we went around corners. Believe me, my position in the car was less about humbly taking the "last place" than it was about losing out on the best place.

So as I read this story of James and John and right places and left places this time, however, I noticed something a little beyond the fight to get the best place. For weeks now, Jesus has been trying to help the disciples understand what is coming — and it is a far cry from the image of honor that James and John are holding onto. Jesus has told them several times now that struggle, persecution, rejection, and even death is in store for the followers of Jesus, but as so often happens in Mark's gospel, the disciples just don't get it. James and John are picturing glory and thrones and recognition, and thinking they may get to share in that at Jesus' right and left hand — when what is actually coming is the cross, with Jesus in the middle, one at his left and one at his right, hung not in glory, but in suffering and death.

It's no wonder the disciples don't understand. They probably don't want to understand. I know I wouldn't! The disciples have spent three years following Jesus now, listening to him teach, having left behind their families, friends, source of livelihood, everything, and now Jesus is talking not about overthrowing Roman rule and righting the wrongs of occupation, but about being arrested, tortured, and murdered by the state. I imagine they are all wondering, in their own way, what really is next, and what things will look like when it's all over. After all, they can't keep wandering around following an itinerant preacher, depending on handouts and goodwill forever, can they?

It's not surprising that James and John got a bit stuck in their ego, trying to envision a way that this could turn out well for them. Three years in, with things seemingly falling apart and not together, James and John just want to have some sense that they are on the right path, and haven't wasted their time, all these years. And yes, maybe they just want a little recognition for everything they've given up,

to follow this man from Nazareth, who is now showing signs of being a bit lost. Where is that going to leave them if they can't establish their place?

In his book *Let Your Life Speak*, author, teacher, and student Parker Palmer shares an experience that may be similar to what James and John were going through in today's gospel. He was teaching in Pendle Hill, and was offered the job of president at a community educational institution, and he was certain that he should take it. As a practicing Quaker, however, Palmer convened a clearness committee, a group of trusted companions with whom he could talk through the decision and discern what he was called to do.

After a while of questioning and listening, one of the participants asked Palmer the question, "What would you most like about being president?" "The simplicity of the question," Palmer says, "lowered me from my head to my heart. I remember pondering for at least a full minute before I could respond." And when he does respond, he finds himself only able to name the things he wouldn't like — giving up teaching, the politics and gladhanding, no summer vacation — until his companion asks him the question again.

Palmer writes, " 'Well,' said I in the smallest voice I possess, 'I guess what I'd like most would be getting my picture in the paper with the word president under it.' " As he reflects on this moment he writes, "By then it was obvious, even to me, that my desire to be president had more to do with my ego than the ecology of my life, so obvious that when the clearness committee ended, I called the school and removed my name from consideration."

James and John certainly were caught up in ego, rather than being attentive to the ecology of their lives. It is such a human thing, isn't it? Jesus, one more time, reminds them: it's not about being first or last, or on the left or on the right, or in the front seat of the car or in the middle with your feet on the hump. At God's table, all the seats have the best food, the best people, the best view. At the Communion table, and in the kin-dom of heaven, there is room for everyone and no need to fight for a place to sit.

As the Spirit moves on, today's readings invite us to continue to seek the will of God, not in security or honor as our egos so easily lean into, but in the ways we can uniquely serve, giving of ourselves to God, to others, and to the world. The call to Jesus is, as it always has been, about going where the Spirit leads, embodying the love of God in the world, and serving those around us, trusting that wherever we go we will not be alone.

Thanks be to God.

\*\*\* Keywords \*\*\*

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