

All we like sheep have gone astray; we have all turned to our own way, and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.

These words are held dear to us. Handel set them, and most of the reading from Isaiah, as part of his great piece, Messiah. We love these words, and we should. But to paraphrase one of the great films characters of all time, Inigo Montoya from the Princess Bride, “you keep using those words, but I don’t think you know what they mean.”

That’s sort of how I hear Jesus’ response to the disciples in the Gospel today. James and John ask Jesus for a pretty big honor. At formal dinners and banquets, the people seated on either side of the host are the guests of honor. And the brothers seem to think they have earned those seats.

They’ve stuck with him. They’ve followed Jesus all over the place, helped do crowd control. They went to cast out demons when sent, and helped feed that massive crowd of more than five thousand. They had served the messiah’s bidding and surely he would reward them. Of course, when this request became public, the others got angry, but I’m betting it is because they too felt they deserved those seats.

But Jesus understood what we have not been able to grasp fully from that day until now, the life of Christ comes without honor and without position as we define it in the world. We think we understand this, but if we are honest with ourselves we don’t.

Jesus even asks the brothers if they are willing to drink from his cup and take his baptism. They respond “Yes!” and before we condemn them or roll our eyes too much, we say the same thing. The number of times I’ve said how much I want to follow the example of Christ and truly love my neighbor. To truly care for the poor and cast aside of society. Standing here before you proclaiming the Gospel, I really have to be careful not to sound as though somehow being in this place of leadership I have somehow taken that seat, drunk from the cup, and taken the baptism that Christ speaks of. Because I haven’t.

Jesus knows that we can never bear the burden of our iniquities, even when we think we still can. We have no idea the punishment due us because we honestly have no idea the depth of our sin. This isn’t a race to purity, because that race is unwinnable. None of us are worthy of the seat to the right and left of Christ as we think of that honor. It is unattainable because the only way we know to get that is by measuring who among us is greater.

Knowing this, Jesus takes the time to rewrite the requirements.

To be the greatest we must work to be the least. We must seek to serve, because that is why Jesus came among us, to teach us that servant leadership wins out over force and power. Being willing to look at the next person and ask how can I help them rather than how can they help me. It isn’t changing the concept of power structures, we still need leaders, but those leaders must never think themselves better, or greater, or more powerful than anyone else. They must know that leading by love brings people together and creates a community of trust and understanding rather than leading to create a community of fear.

This is a much more difficult world to make, because our human nature seeks to care for ourselves first. This is true of all of us. Yet, the community of Christ means I focus on your needs because I know my neighbor is focused on mine. It doesn’t absolve me of responsibility, but it frees me from free that if I

care for you I will have to give up and lose something. Creating a community of Christ is the embodiment of nothing to lose, because I know that if I give you what you need, it will be there for me when I need it as well.

That's more faith than I can muster on many days. That life requires me to trust people I don't want to trust because I don't believe that they have the same attitude and thought. I will get taken advantage of, used, and mistreated if I act that way to EVERYONE. And as much as I speak like James and John and say I am ready to do that, I'm not.

I want to be a servant leader. I want to be willing to help those around me, but there's just some folks I'm not wholly comfortable doing that with. There are trust issues. There's history that I feel will repeat itself. There's lots of reasons, and so I don't. I'm not proud of that, but I must admit it because it is true. There're just some folks I don't have the energy to love and serve the way I should each and every day.

That is where Jesus is the fulfilment of the prophecy.

All we like sheep have gone astray; we have all turned to our own way, and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.

Long before any of us were alive, God knew we would have that struggle. God knew that we might strive to live a heavenly kingdom life here on earth, but our humanity would get in the way. It has for years and will for time to come. So God sends Jesus, wholly human and wholly God, to bear the sin of the world. To be our cleansing moment.

I can work for the Church, for Christ, for my neighbor, and for the stranger all day long, but I will never fully drink from the cup and take the baptism Christ took. I will never be alone, even at my lowest moment, because Christ took that depth of alone on the cross. I will never be without someone to hold me, I will never be without a companion. And because of that I will never fully drink the cup.

But I don't have to. In the Gospel Jesus asks the question but doesn't tell them they have to do it. There need be but one and he took that role, willingly, and took it for James and John even though he knew they were lying when they said that could do it. They may not have known, but he knew.

And that is how it is with us. We have two thousand years of Gospel reflection. We have time and space to ponder the words of Christ, rather than hearing and reacting first hand. We have the opportunity to know what is truly being asked, to know the end game, and we still say yes and we still are not telling the truth.

Yet the truth is simply this, while we are yet sinners, Christ died for us. Say what we will, strive to do what is right, feel bad when we fail, fail miserably in the eyes of the world, yet we don't fail in the eyes of God. For God knows what we often hate to admit, we are but wholly human unlike the one who died for us. And for that sacrifice may we all give thanks.

Amen.