

LOVE AND THUNDER
Sermon, May 9, 2021
Mother's Day
Texts: Matthew 20:17-28, I John 5:1-5

Probably more than any other Biblical author, the apostle John writes of the love of God, so much so that John is often referred to as the Apostle of Love. We've been reading select lectionary texts these past few weeks from John's epistles, such as last week from I John 4, *"Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love. If anyone says, 'I love God,' yet hates his brother, he is a liar! This is how God showed His love among us: He sent His one and only Son into the world that we might live through Him. This is love: not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in him we love because He first loved us."* And the very familiar words from his Gospel, John 3:16, are known by us all: *"For God so loved the world, that He gave His only son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have life full, abundant and eternal. For God did not send His son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through Him."* And alone of all the Gospels, John records the new "mandatum" (Latin for "commandment", why we call that night Maundy Thursday), that His disciples should love one another, just as He loved them. John, the Apostle of Love.

We just read an interesting account involving this very same John, which took place the night before the first Palm Sunday, Jesus' entry into Jerusalem. We're told a particular woman, a woman who happened to be John's mother, comes to Jesus and says, *"Grant that one of these two sons of mine may sit at Your right hand and the other at Your left in Your kingdom."* In other words, *"Jesus, in Your kingdom I want my sons, James and John, these two disciples of Yours, to sit one on your right and your left."* These, by the way, are positions of closeness and intimacy, but they are also positions of power and influence ... she apparently had great hopes for her boys. Now, just who is this woman? We are told she is the *"mother of the sons of Zebedee."* And we know Zebedee's sons are the disciples James and John. We find out more about her by comparing Matthew, Mark and John's Gospel accounts of the women who were later at the cross of Jesus; this woman was there. Matthew 27:56 names her *"the mother of Zebedee's sons,"* just as he does in today's passage. Mark 15:40 identifies her by name, calling her Salome. And John's Gospel, whose author IS this woman's son (according to the consensus of traditional biblical scholars), identifies her in John 19:25 as the sister of Jesus' mother. So, this means that Salome, Zebedee's wife, John's mother, is Jesus' Auntie Salome, which makes her two sons Jesus' younger cousins. So, some think Auntie Salome is trying to exert a little family influence here with her Messiah nephew to get her boys special treatment!

As we read, Jesus replied, addressing His aunt and two younger cousins, *"You really don't know what you are asking. Can you drink the cup I am going to drink?"* Suffice it to say for now, they understood this imagery, this euphemism, of the cup of suffering. They knew this was Jesus' way of asking, *"Can you endure the suffering that I am going to endure? Do you think you're really ready for that?"* The boys answered, with all the youthful, idealistic, energetic (and slightly naive) optimism of their younger years, *"SURE!"* After a pause, Jesus replies, and I'm sure with a note of sad affection and a prophet's eye to the future, *"Yes, you will drink from My cup."*

There is much in this cup imagery; we've looked into some on past Maundy Thursdays. For now I'll just point out we know, from the vantage point of history, they would indeed suffer ... James was, in fact, the first of the disciples to die a martyr's death. We read in Acts 12 he was put to death by the sword by command of King Herod Agrippa. John, too, would go on to face much suffering and persecution; he would also live to endure seeing all his fellow apostles die horrible martyrs' deaths. He was the only apostle to die a natural death, but that wasn't for lack of his persecutors trying to kill him. Tradition has it he lived well into his nineties, his final years in exile on the isle of Patmos in the Aegean Sea. Jesus continued, *"Yes, you will drink My cup, but to sit at My right hand and left is not for Me to grant. That's My Father's decision."*

We are told that when the other ten disciples heard about this request, they weren't happy. They were indignant. Everyone is on edge anyway, because Jerusalem was not a safe place for them to go, and injected into this tense atmosphere that night is this irritant of what is perceived by them as ambitious maneuvering by these younger upstarts and their pushy mother. We know from other sources that James and John are the youngest disciples, John the youngest of them all; some scholars speculate he may have been only sixteen or seventeen at the time. That's why in many of the paintings of the apostles, particularly Leonardo's Last Supper, there are usually two beardless disciples. These two are beardless not because they shaved; they're beardless because they haven't shaved yet! James and John, the sons of Zebedee and Salome, are the young'uns of the apostolic band. Earlier on in the Gospels, Jesus gave them a nickname, calling them *"Boanerges"* which means *"Sons of Thunder."* This was more than likely a reference to their energetic youthfulness, idealism and at-times thunderous temperaments which were always impatiently ready to explode about something. In Luke 9 we read

John and James wanted to call down heavenly fire to destroy some disagreeable Samaritans who did not welcome them; these idealistic, impatient Sons of Thunder just wanted God to blast away those ornery heretics in the Samaritan Presbytery who deserved a little divine judgment. Added to this mix is what looks like an apparently ambitious mother not shy about requesting special favors because she's a relative, and we can be pretty sure the other disciples have probably just about had enough, especially on this tension-filled night!

Just as something of a brief aside: I've come to look at mom Salome a bit differently in my older years; I no longer see Salome as an ambitious and aggressive status seeking "dragon mom." On this Mother's Day, I'd like to point out that I see her as a loving and conscientious mother who wants the very best for her children whom she loves fiercely, and she will use all her gifts and skills and experiences ... and connections ... in trying to give and get the very best for them. Maybe she just wants her sons to be as close to Jesus as possible, identifying closely with Him and all He stood for, and that's a **good** thing for a mother to want for her children! As I was raising my children as a widowed parent all those years, I really don't think I fully realized how very much they missed out on by simply not having the hundreds if not thousands of ways each and every single day the conscientious mom interacts with her child to mold and shape and love them into maturity. At times I can get almost weepy ... sweetly weepy, to be sure ... when I see mothers lovingly interacting with their kids in the countless ways only a mom can. Now, we managed OK, but I know my children would have been so much better off in immeasurable ways had they enjoyed the privilege of a living and loving mom interacting with them throughout their lives. Mothers have such a unique power of influence with their children, no matter how old those children get. A quick example: The former police chief of seventeen years for Knoxville, Tennessee (*who now serves with the Justice Department*), Phil Keith, tells of receiving a call on his cell phone from his mother while in the middle of a televised press conference. Chief Keith was pretty sure his mother wouldn't call him at this time and under those circumstances unless something was seriously wrong, so he excused himself from the live televised conference to take the call. His mother said, "Phil Keith, are you chewing gum?" He said, "Um, yes, ma'am." Mom: "Well, it looks awful, and you're on TV. Spit it out." So, the Knoxville Chief of Police spit out his gum and returned to finish the press conference. Isn't it amazing the influence mothers exert over our lives throughout our lives?

Jesus does a remarkable thing with this scene. He doesn't scold His aunt, nor does He admonish these two young disciples, nor does He rebuke the somewhat obnoxious resentment and indignation of the older disciples. He takes that awkward moment and *redeems* it ... Jesus has a way of taking all His followers' bad moments and redeeming them, but that's almost another sermon. He redeems the moment by making it a great teaching moment. More accurately, He makes it a teaching moment about what is truly great. True greatness is measured not by position or power; it is measured by love and giving and sacrifice and service to God and others ... things, by the way, most conscientious mothers of faith instinctively know. Don't be motivated by the power to coerce, by the power to enforce, by the power to control, by the power to be in charge or the power to punish or threaten. Be motivated by the desire to do whatever you can to set things right, to make things better, and more often than not that is done by our loving service. As Jesus said, "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you! Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave - just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many."

The sermon title, "Love and Thunder," was, uh, "borrowed" from the next **Thor** movie ... Marvel's "Thor Four" is scheduled for release next May (*for those who don't know, Thor is the God of Thunder, and a bit of spoiler alert: the theme centers around his relationship with his human ladyfriend Jane who assumes the mantle and hammer of Thor*)¹ There's a nice epilogue to this story: Again, the consensus of traditional scholarship believes that John, this younger Son of Thunder, is the author of the Gospel and the three epistles that bear his name. This son of Zebedee and Salome, this temperamental, hot-headed, zealous, intense and impatient Son of Thunder who once wanted to blast away some disagreeable Samaritans ... that's John! Yet, this stormy and perhaps slightly narcissistic young man is the one who more than any other New Testament writer writes so eloquently about the gracious, merciful, redemptive, patient love of God, and he seems humbly reticent to put himself forward in his writings. He is the *only* disciple not mentioned by name in the fourth gospel (*which he penned*); when he does enter his own narrative, it is indirectly. We read in John's gospel about the nameless "disciple whom Jesus loved." It is more than likely John identified himself that way because he wished to emphasize that **he is the changed man he is precisely and only because Jesus loved him**. This was John's way of humbly saying that apart from Jesus' special love and attention, he would have continued to be an intolerant, short-tempered, zealously ambitious, full of himself sinner, instead of the patient, loving, gentle, godly, even-tempered, selfless and gracious gentleman so evident in his writings. Seen this way, it is a self-deprecating observation that he was the disciple Jesus loved, because he is probably saying that more than the other eleven, he was the one *most in need* of Jesus' attention; more than anyone else, he needed to be close to Jesus and His redemptive, passionate love.

And I believe his mom knew it.

¹ See <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt10648342>