

TAKING THE CAKE

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Grace Church in New York
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*“Whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve.”
(Mark 10:43)*

Good morning, Grace Church! Today marks my second week here as your newest priest, working with Children, Youth, and Family Ministry. I spent last Sunday shadowing both Don and Chase, finding my way around this big, beautiful church, learning how to use the 16 keys on my new key ring—and now this week, they have let me into the pulpit. And I am so glad to be here, and thank you for welcoming me with open arms.

Two Sundays ago, I spent my last day at All Saints’ Church in Park Slope, Brooklyn, where I had been serving for 5 years. To celebrate my departure from that place, they did the customary church thing of getting a huge sheet cake with my name on it. They fit a lot of words on it: “Dear Mother Julia, we love you, we will miss you,” in delicate script nestled among huge frosting flowers. All the children from the Sunday School gathered around, eager for some cake, and two of the most rambunctious of the group, sisters named Addie and Zavia, were on my right and my left as I was about to cut into it. “Mother Julia, Mother Julia, can I have the biggest flower?” Addie begged. “No, I get the biggest flower!” Zavia screamed in retort.

Hearing their pleas, I was instantly transported back to my own childhood, and the many, many sheet cakes I encountered in church basements or at family reunions or at birthday parties. As soon as I would spot a cake on a food table, no matter the function, my whole purpose in life became making sure that I would get the best slice of it, with the most frosting possible, and the most beautiful flower. What adult is going to cut this cake? I would try to identify the most likely suspects, so that I could garner their favor. Would it be my mother? Then I would be extremely kind and caring with my two younger brothers so she would be very happy and see that I deserved the biggest hunk of flower-shaped frosting possible. Or would it be a teacher, in which case I would try to have all the answers and be as helpful as possible until it was time to cut that cake, and she would have to give it to me, her favorite student.

Most of you don’t know me very well yet, so let me fill you in on some basic facts about me: I am slightly competitive. By that I mean, I like to have the right answers. I like to do everything perfectly on the first try. I like to win. I mean, it’s just more fun to be the best, am I right? (And I also really like cake.) Specifically, getting the biggest flower from a fancy sheet cake became a thing I would really vie for, especially against my brothers. In case you think I might be exaggerating for the sake of this sermon, a few years ago, we unearthed some family camcorder footage of my great grandmother’s 95th birthday party. As we all gathered around to sing happy birthday, you can see me at the side of the screen inching my way to the cake. And when the singing is over, you can actually hear me asking my mom for the biggest flower. It was slightly mortifying to see and hear this footage nearly 30 years later.

Now, it’s not always cake that is the culprit. I think some kids have this with getting the front seat in the car, or the best seat at the dinner table, or the biggest cookie, the best, the most, it goes on and on. It is a natural impulse for children, for all of us, to fight to get what we want, to fight to win. But I also remember the anxiety that came along with always trying to get the best

flower. Seeing that footage so many years later, I still felt it in my bones. You know that anxious feeling of entering a room wanting to *win*? The pressure to be always strategizing instead of getting to know the other people there. The impulse to elbow others out of your way so that you can get the prize.

I think this is just what is happening in the story we hear this morning from the Gospel of Mark. Two brothers, James and John, are letting their inner competitive children come out. And very much like sneaky children, they think they have a great plan to get Jesus to give them what they want. They ask him, “Hey Jesus, you love us so much, will you give us whatever we ask for?” Those of you who are parents, if your children haven’t said those exact words, they’ve probably tugged those same strings in you: “If you love me, you’ll let me have whatever I want. Pretty please????”

But Jesus, like a good parent, responds, “Well, before I answer, what are you asking for?”

The two brothers respond, “We want to sit on your right and left in your glory.” Basically, we want the best seats in the house. We want the biggest flower on the cake. We want to be your favorites. We want to win.

This is actually a beautiful moment of story-telling by the author of the Gospel of Mark, because those of us hearing this part of the story know how it will eventually end. We know that to be on the right and the left of Jesus is not actually going to be about glory, about winning. Some might say it’s not a good seat at all, because it is going to mean to be on a cross, fellow victims of the Roman state, to be crucified on Jesus’ right and left. It means failure; it means pain; it means death. Jesus knows this, too. Just as a good parent knows that the biggest flower is going to put their child into sugar shock, Jesus tries to let James and John know how difficult it is going to end up being, to be close to him.

My favorite part of this story is what happens next. It’s a really classic case study in children and sibling dynamics. Because even though Jesus tells James and John a big resounding *no* to their request, the other ten disciples get word, somehow, that James and John were trying to get something special out of Jesus, and so the ten of them go and get angry at James and John! This is the moment with children where there is a total meltdown, right? “She took the biggest flower!” “No, she did!” And the parent intervenes and says, “No one got any flowers, okay? No one is getting any cake at all!”

“But she was *trying* to get the biggest flower!” That’s what the disciples basically say, “but James and John were trying to be better than us!!”

“So Jesus called them and said to them, “You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. But it is not so among you; whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all.”” (Mark 10:43)

There is a way that the world out there works, out on Broadway, here in New York City, in this country, in this world. Where every room you enter becomes a competition, every day you wake up is another chance to get more and more, to beat out others, even your closest friends, for the glory. And then there is a way that Jesus works, here at Grace Church, here in this family, here in this holy temple. What *freedom* is there for us when we enter a room not vying for the biggest flower, but rather looking for the person who has no chance of getting it, no chance of winning? What *freedom* is there for us when we cut a piece of that cake, and give it to that person, instead?

That sacrificial release from competition and self-interest is what Jesus wants for us and for the way we order our communities and our lives.

If you keep watching that family video, my mother, being the good priest that she is (yes, this is a family business), lets me know that I can have a piece of cake as soon as I have served everyone else their pieces of cake. I fight back, of course. It didn't feel liberating at the time. At the time, I wanted the frosting, and I had failed in my mission. But in retrospect, I'm sure giving my Gragru her cake first, at one of her last birthdays, made whatever unadorned frosting I did get, taste all the more sweet.

How can we teach each other to be servants? How can we model Jesus' vision of leadership through servanthood?

There was another moment this past week that brought me right back to childhood. (And I have appreciated these moments as I embark on this journey of caring for the children and youth of this church.) Last week, after Evensong here at 4pm, I processed out behind the choristers into the Honor Room, here at the side of the church. And before they ripped off their robes, they recited the prayer they say after every rehearsal or service, the Choristers' Prayer. I used to say it, too, but I hadn't heard it in years, and like riding a bike, it came flooding back into my memory: "Bless O Lord, us thy servants who minister in thy temple. Grant that what we sing with our lips we may believe in our hearts, and what we believe in our hearts, we may show forth in our lives, through Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen."

I love this prayer! I love it because of its really good theology. And it's not just for choristers, either, it's for all of you who got out of bed this morning to come to church. You showed up and you're saying the words in the prayer book, singing the words in the hymnal. Just by doing that, you have already walked into this room not to win but to serve. Just by being here. Your prayer, then, is not that you are the best, not that everything is all sorted out or known or understood. Your prayer is not to win or to get more. Your prayer is simply that you might believe what you are saying. Not even that you already do believe it. But that you might. "Grant that what we sing with our lips we may believe in our hearts."

The more we pray this prayer, the more the great love of God will show forth in our lives. Imagine the world then, if this church full of people, if each of you would go out into the world not to win but to serve. And I know it's harder than it sounds, my friends. Take it from me, I like to win! It is countercultural in 2018, in America, in New York City, not to want to be the greatest. But it is not the way of Christ. In the way of Christ, here in this temple, whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant.

When Jesus tries to explain this to James and John, he asks them if they think they will be able to do it. "We are able," they respond. I don't know if they really believed in their hearts that they would be able to do what Jesus needed them to do, or even if they knew what that could be. And I know that they were probably pretty annoyed they didn't get the answer they were looking for. But they responded nevertheless, "We are able." May we, too, respond to Jesus in this way, when he calls us to serve each other, when he calls us to show forth his love in the world: "We are able." Even if you are not totally sure you believe it yet, in the grand tradition of children and choristers everywhere, say it anyway. We are able. Amen.