

Poor Jesus. He is constantly trying to get through to his disciples about what's going to happen to him, and they just can't take it in, or hold onto it for very long. They have recognized him as messiah, and he has told them that the messiah will suffer and die, but that doesn't compute. It's like saying, "the bachelor will take his wife to the beach." It's an oxymoron, a messiah who suffers and dies. So after he's taken them aside *again* in today's reading and gotten really specific about the humiliations he'll undergo, I imagine James and John quiet for about half an hour and then bouncing back to a discussion they'd been having earlier before he said those strange things that don't make sense: "Teacher, grant us to sit at your left and right hand when you're in your glory."

James and John have a mental model of what it looks like to be a close personal friend of the messiah; they're just articulating it here for the first time. And it reminds me of the kinds of fantasies that Tom Sawyer shared with his friends, being a boy of imagination and just a little more book-learning than the rest of them. In Chapter 13 of *Tom Sawyer*, Tom and his friend Joe Harper feel ill-used by their families and resolve to run away. "Joe was for being a hermit, and living on crusts in a remote cave, and dying, some time, of cold and want and grief; but after listening to Tom, he conceded that there were some conspicuous advantages about a life of crime, and so he consented to be a pirate."

Having enjoyed their first meal as pirates, they lay back and gloated.

"It's just the life for me," said Tom. "You don't have to get up, mornings, and you don't have to go to school, and wash, and all that blame foolishness. You see a pirate don't have to do ANYTHING, Joe, when he's ashore, but a hermit HE has to be praying considerable, and then he don't have any fun, anyway, all by himself that way."

"Oh yes, that's so," said Joe, "but I hadn't thought much about it, you know. I'd a good deal rather be a pirate, now that I've tried it."

"You see," said Tom, "people don't go much on hermits, nowadays, like they used to in old times, but a pirate's always respected. And a hermit's got to sleep on the hardest place he can find, and put sackcloth and ashes on his head, and stand out in the rain, and—"

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Presently Huck said:

"What does pirates have to do?"

Tom said:

"Oh, they have just a bully time—take ships and burn them, and get the money and bury it in awful places in their island where there's ghosts and things to watch it, and kill everybody in the ships—make 'em walk a plank."

"And they carry the women to the island," said Joe; "they don't kill the women."

"No," assented Tom, "they don't kill the women—they're too noble. And the women's always beautiful, too."

"And don't they wear the bulliest clothes! Oh no! All gold and silver and di'monds," said Joe, with enthusiasm.

Tom has a well-developed idea of what a pirate's life is like, clearly based on trashy stories rather than on any first-hand reports of piracy, and his idea makes perfect sense to his friends. Now, the disciples are grown men, and although they're poor fishermen, they probably have a pretty good notion of how people in power behave and arrange themselves. Kings do have seats at their sides for their principal helpers; and it is likely that people with the kind of long service record that John and James have would occupy those seats if Jesus were king. So their fantasy is not based on fiction, the way Tom's is. But it is just as misguided.

Jesus' response to their request is to ask whether they're able to drink the cup he drinks or be baptized with the baptism with which he's baptized—both allusions to his suffering and death. "Oh yes, we're able," they say. And Jesus says, well, you *will* drink that cup and undergo that baptism, so congratulations for that, but I'm not in charge of this train, and I can't grant you seats anywhere. Then the other ten disciples catch wind of what James and John were up

to and get mad and Jesus tries again to tell them something that just doesn't make sense:

“whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all.”

In *Tom Sawyer*, the chapter closes with Tom and Joe stricken with guilt because they had stolen the food they'd eaten for dinner.

They tried to argue it away by reminding conscience that they had purloined sweetmeats and apples scores of times; but conscience was not to be appeased by such thin plausibilities; it seemed to them, in the end, that there was no getting around the stubborn fact that taking sweetmeats was only "hooking," while taking bacon and hams and such valuables was plain simple stealing—and there was a command against that in the Bible. So they inwardly resolved that so long as they remained in the business, their piracies should not again be sullied with the crime of stealing. Then conscience granted a truce, and these curiously inconsistent pirates fell peacefully to sleep.

The joke is that pirates are, by definition, thieves; Tom and Joe haven't the first idea what piracy is really about. And in the same way, Jesus wants the disciples to understand that messiahs and their followers are by definition servants—but that just does not make sense to the disciples. Messiahs and their followers *rule*.

I think blind Bartimaeus functions at least partly as an alternative model. For those whose only model of how power is exercised is the throne room, Bartimaeus illustrates a different way that messianic power might work. He is actually a fairly powerless person, being blind and therefore a beggar. But when he hears that Jesus is approaching, he uses his voice to draw Jesus' attention, however obnoxiously, and he calls him by the messianic name, Son of David. So he uses the power he has, number one, and he doesn't let other people tell him that he shouldn't. Number two, Bartimaeus' request is for Jesus to “let him see,” which of course means let him see, but also means, in Mark's gospel, give him insight. On a literal level,

restoration of sight would enable Bartimaeus to rejoin the community as an equal with others—not lording power *over* others, but exercising the power of membership. And then number three, once his vision is restored, Bartimaeus uses his now enhanced ability, not to go home and serve himself, but *to join Jesus on the Way*. The model of power that Bartimaeus offers is one’s enhanced ability, if enhanced only by chutzpah, put in service of the kingdom of God. And then advancing steadily upon Jerusalem, the belly of the beast.

I think ultimately Tom and Joe don’t really want to be pirates, because stealing makes them feel guilty and they probably wouldn’t like eating hardtack or some of the other realities of a pirate’s life. What they think is “pirate” is actually “romantic dramatic role,” and that they *would* enjoy, very much. In the same way, the disciples have a fantasy about what it means to be bringing in the kingdom of God, and their fantasy is sadly inaccurate. It’s not ease and glory, but speaking up for those who are easy to overlook, even if it’s your own self who’s being overlooked. It’s applying your gifts and energy to building community, rather than dominating community. But I don’t blame the disciples for not getting it. Every model of power they’d ever seen was “power over.” You can’t imagine what you’ve never glimpsed. They had to make the path by walking it, learn the truth by going through it. It takes reading the whole gospel of Mark, and then sitting back and sitting with that story, to unsee the old model and see the radical reality that Jesus taught and enacted. The kingdom of God is everybody in, nobody out. It’s feeling others’ sorrows with them. It’s lifting up my sister or brother so that / will not fall down. You have to do it to get it, and that’s what Bartimaeus knew when he regained his sight and his insight.

Lord Jesus, it was hard for your disciples to hear that they would have to suffer in order to follow you. Give us faith and courage to follow you when following is painful or frightening. Amen.