

No sooner has Jesus finished talking very clearly about his expectation of humiliation and death than James and John come to him with their cringe-worthy request for glory. “Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory.” It’s as if they hadn’t heard a word he was saying—or as if what they’d heard was too painful, so they skipped ahead to what they imagined would be the case after the third day. Jesus tells them, “You do not know what you are asking,” and implies that they will not understand until after they’ve suffered.

The truth is, Jesus doesn’t have the power to grant this request. Literally, he does not have the power, even if he thought it were appropriate, even if he wanted to grant it. They want to sit next to him on his throne, which means that they want honor and respect and power. Jesus never had any control over what people respected and honored; he commented on people’s priorities and spiritual blindness, but if they didn’t want to, they never had to take seriously anything he said. Jesus *can’t* give James and John access to the honor they want. Moreover, the nature of Jesus’ power was never glorious or elevating. His power was always vulnerability and weakness, the power to attract and to transform through love. So Jesus literally cannot grant this request, and it must have been dismaying to him that after all this time, his own disciples would want such a thing and ask it of him. He says, “Whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all.”

The video of Derek Redmond’s loss in the 1992 Olympics, juxtaposed with Coldplay’s song “Kingdom Come,” suggests that coming in last because of his injury highlighted the way in which he was also “first”—he was beloved, and he had

someone to jump out of the stands and finish the race with him, and that is powerful and precious in a way that winning a race is not. It's not like having his father come down and hold him up to finish neutralized the pain of losing. I'm sure it was heartbreaking—frustrating and baffling and humiliating. The pain must have been unbearably bitter. But this was also a moment of great blessing, solidarity with him by his dad who has always loved him. Thich Nhat Hanh says that compassion, which is enlightenment, comes out of great suffering—the lotus grows out of the mud made up of decayed lotuses.

The poet Naomi Shihab Nye wrote this poem, called "Kindness."

Before you know what kindness really is
you must lose things,
feel the future dissolve in a moment
like salt in a weakened broth.
What you held in your hand,
what you counted and carefully saved,
all this must go so you know
how desolate the landscape can be
between the regions of kindness.
How you ride and ride
thinking the bus will never stop,
the passengers eating maize and chicken
will stare out the window forever.
Before you learn the tender gravity of kindness,
you must travel where the Indian in a white poncho
lies dead by the side of the road.
You must see how this could be you,
how he too was someone
who journeyed through the night with plans
and the simple breath that kept him alive.
Before you know kindness as the deepest thing inside,
you must know sorrow as the other deepest thing.
You must wake up with sorrow.
You must speak to it till your voice
catches the thread of all sorrows
and you see the size of the cloth.
Then it is only kindness that makes sense anymore,
only kindness that ties your shoes

and sends you out into the day to mail letters and purchase bread,
only kindness that raises its head
from the crowd of the world to say
It is I you have been looking for,
and then goes with you everywhere
like a shadow or a friend. <http://spiritualityhealth.com/articles/kindness-naomi-shihab-nye>

The occasion for this poem was her honeymoon in 1978, in Colombia, where the bus on which she and her husband were traveling was robbed, and they lost everything—passports, travellers' checks, cameras, money. Another passenger on the bus, an Indian, was killed, and they knew it could have been them. The bus took them to a tiny town, and they decided that her husband would have to hitchhike to a larger city where he could get their documents reinstated and get enough money for them both to travel again. So she was left in the town plaza with nothing but her little notebook and pencil, as twilight fell. That's when she wrote the poem, and she said it was like automatic writing—she learned the meaning of the poem as she wrote it.

Once I had written it down, things came clearer. I knew what I could do to find something to eat, where I might go to find a place to sleep. This gift of openness and possibility overtook the sense of being stricken. The poem was a lever I held onto as I found my way.

“Before you know what kindness really is, you must lose things,” she had written. Having lost *all* her things, she looked for kindness. What she found was a gang of street children who collected Coke bottles and turned them in for a few pesos so that they could buy a bun to share. She showed them that she had nothing, and they let her join their group and have the occasional bun. She said, “They were so gracious!”

Jesus and his disciples came to Jericho, but Mark doesn't say anything about

what may have happened there. He skips ahead to the point where they were leaving Jericho, when blind Bartimaeus perceived who was coming and began to shout for help. People shushed him but he kept crying out until Jesus asked him, “What do you want me to do for you?” Bartimaeus called him “my teacher”. He wanted to see, to learn—and that was something that Jesus *could* do for him—teach him. Bartimaeus regained his sight and followed Jesus on the way.

Jesus must have been so dismayed, if not surprised, when John and James made their request for privilege after being with him for so long. How discouraging, to see that nothing you’ve said or done has penetrated. But they stuck with him, and he stuck with them and kept on teaching—so I think he must also have seen what they could not see, which was the kindness deep inside of them. “Before you know kindness as the deepest thing inside,/you must know sorrow as the other deepest thing,” says the poet, and James and John will certainly know deepest sorrow very soon. “Then it is only kindness that makes sense any more.”

Let us pray.

Lord of the Dance, whose wisdom manifests as compassion, in all the world’s cruelty and indifference, may we act from kindness. In all our sorrows may we also discover kindness. In this season of reflection, teach us to see. Amen.