

**Hebrews 5:1-9; Mark 10:35-45**  
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Anne Lamont, in her book, *Plan B*, talks about her life as a single Mom. At the time the book was written, Sam, who had just turned 13, had come into adolescence as what Lamont claimed, was the “grabbing phase.” Whether Anne was grabbing at Sam or at the hood of his sweatshirt, whether Sam was grabbing for independence, he needed her to drag him everywhere. Or whether they were both grabbing for attention or time or control or power – there was a lot of grabbing going on in their household. To help her cope, she put a quote on the wall: breathe, be calm, pray, and stop grabbing.

I remember well when the grabbing stage hit my household, and it didn’t seem to come and go with adolescence. Growing up with three siblings very close in age, grabbing went on for many years and all of the time. We were grabbing for something from each other, whether it was the remote control for the TV, whether it was the last pop tart. But, most of all, we were grabbing after the best seat in the car. Whenever my parents told us it was time to get in the car, all of us began screaming, and I remember the anxiety I got as I tried to best my brothers and sisters, “Mom’s side, or Dad’s back seat side,” for they were the best seats, the window seats. It is universally known that the middle seat is always the worst.

In our scripture today, let me suggest that the disciples, too, are in a grabbing phase of life, as we witness James and John grab after greatness, grab after the best seats in the house. They say to Jesus, “We want you to do for us what we ask,” and in his greatness he responds, “What is it?” “Arrange it,” they ask, “so that we will be in the places of honor and glory – one of us at your right and one at your left.” James and John grab audaciously and cluelessly for greatness. And if we look at the verses just prior to our reading, we can see why we can call this a shameless grabbing.

Mark 10, verse 32 describes how Jesus and the Disciples were on their way to Jerusalem, and they were amazed and afraid, and Jesus took the group together for a teaching moment to tell them what was going to happen to him. Did they not just hear what Jesus told them? Or were they in such denial of Christ’s foretold suffering and death that the news hadn’t sunk in yet? At any rate James and John fought over the fact that Jesus had warned them for the third time in Mark’s gospel that he would suffer and die. But James and John are focused on something else. They are focused on themselves, they are grabbing after greatness. They desire the best seats.

Mark’s readers and some of us may be appalled at their insensitivity, but Jesus isn’t. You see, he knows the character of his Disciples. He knows they are faithful and he knows they are befuddled. He knows they are operating, as one Theologian puts it, “it is our incurable tendency to put ourselves first.” So Jesus listens and asks what he can do for them. He hears in their request their need for greatness, and he knows they haven’t a clue what they are asking. When James and John claim that they can drink Christ’s cup and undergo the same baptism that Jesus will, do they really know what they are grabbing after? Was their vision clouded by that human incurable tendency to think of themselves? They may have imagined three glorious thrones high in the heavens in Christ’s soon to come dazzling Kingdom, with Christ in the center and them on

the left and on the right, the next best thrones of honor. All the world would honor them and consider them the favored ones of Christ.

But Jesus could see what they could not, that his Kingdom's reign was about to be brought in. The throne would be crosses, but not in the heavens, but on Calvary, with Jesus nailed on the cross in the center, and thieves strung up beside him, on crosses one on the left and one on the right.

As the disciples followed Jesus to Jerusalem, the Scriptures tell us they were afraid. So fear was the motivator for James and John's outlandish request. They could not understand where Jesus whom they loved was headed and would endure, so they focused on themselves and tried to control what they thought they could, which was their own welfare.

We are as human as those disciples. We, too, have that incurable tendency to put ourselves first. We, too, find ourselves grabbing after greatness, the best seats, when we find ourselves in a grab fest, trying to grab more and faster than anyone else – whether it's power, or money or prestige or that last pop tart or the best seats. What is it that we really want? And why are we in a hurry, in a frenzy to get it? Do we always understand what it is we are asking for? Like the Disciples' fear of the unknown, fear of their future of losing their Lord, causes them to have that sense of grabbing for greatness, for security, for control.

What fears lead us to start grabbing? The other Disciples, the other ten, they also are afraid, afraid of not getting their fair share of greatness. They fume with anger at James and John's grabbing, resentful because they got to Jesus first. They, too, want a place of glory next to Jesus. They squabble among themselves, and their squabbling is not new to Jesus. Just back in Chapter 9 he overheard the Disciples arguing about who was the greatest. Jesus, in his grace, did not rebuke them. He does not even suggest that their request for greatness is out of line. Jesus knows his heavenly Father created them for greatness. God's goal for all humanity through Jesus, through his life and death and resurrection is nothing short of greatness. But the ways of God are not the ways of humans. He uses this moment of the Disciples' anger as a teaching moment to explain to them the difference between God's greatness and the world's greatness. The Gentile rulers in this worldly kingdom, the ones in power who consider themselves great are tyrants. They boast, they belittle, they oppress all under their control. But it's not like this with you who follow me and desire greatness in my Father's Kingdom and will become a servant. If you want power become powerless. If you want to be first, let others cut in front of you, and, better yet, go to the end of the line. If you want to be great, stop grabbing for the best, get down on your knees and serve. Jesus' teaching to the twelve was a teaching to a community. Jesus came to form a community on earth, to show people how to live together. Jesus was about creating the church, his body that would live once he died, rose again and ascended to heaven. It's the body of Christ now. The disciples are a lesson for us, for our families, for us in the church and the church in the world.

The church is not immune from misguided, even scandalous grabbing for position. It's been a part of Christ's world from the beginning. The Letters of the Apostle Paul talk about how Paul was serving as a mediator between churches that were having conflict both internally and externally. And we remember with embarrassment the atrocities performed by the Christian

church in the Crusades and the Inquisition. And in more modern times we remember with horror how Christians entered churches and killed other Christians whose beliefs do not match their own over sensitive issues like abortion.

More tragically, we think we have to defend God. We think that what we do will cause the church to survive. In modern times, also, denominations across the world hear about our dwindling numbers, and we have the fear of dying, but, ironically, Jesus Christ was born to die. But only Christ's body died. Christ's church was built on a rock, and, no matter what we do, this church will not die. We can go about doing Christ's Kingdom work in ways that help the Church of Christ, both here at Knox and in the world, to thrive. When we stop grabbing, when we stop worrying about numbers and money and buildings and what the church across the way is doing, and how we might feel threatened, we need to remember that God has not called us into a spirit of fear. That this body is a gift for us, if we stop grabbing and open up our minds and hearts and make room on the pew next to us. If we go out in the world, loving people as Christ did and not grabbing for greatness, but reaching out in service, the church will thrive and we will experience greatness, for where we enter and come alongside the least of these, whether in our own homes or in the city around us, we will encounter the living Christ.

When we enter the world without grabbing we allow Christ to fill us up, both our hands and our hearts, and that is greatness, my friends. That is the greatness that God plans for us. God planned a seat for us before we were born. It has our name on it. There is always room and there is always an empty seat for someone coming along and seeking God. Jesus shows us how to navigate this world. He let us in on the secret to getting the best seats in the house. He never grabbed for seats. Whatever seat God provided for him, there he sat. He sat at dining tables with Zaccheus and other tax collectors and sinners and traders. He sat at the well with the unclean Samaritan woman. He took a seat on the ground with the prostitute and the Pharisees who wanted to stone her. He wrote in the sand, refusing to condemn her. He knelt before the Disciples and washed the grime from their feet. He sat in the Garden of Gethsemane, weeping, sweating blood, scared to death, praying *thy will, not mine*, and he allowed himself to be enthroned on a cross. He gave his life away for others, for us. He never grabbed after the best seats. He never grabbed after anything. We are promised greatness. We are created for it. We are designed for it. We find it when we stop grabbing, when we give up our seat, when we take a seat assigned to us at any given moment on any given day. It might be a seat next to a friend, or a stranger who is in great pain or is dying. It might be next to the prisoner who is scared of everything. It might be in the gutter next to the homeless person who is cold and hungry. It might be in the seat of humility before those we are at odds with, whether it be ourselves, our partner, our children, our neighbors, or especially our enemies. We find greatness when we are *still* before God. We open our hands and give ourselves away to the least of these. It is there where Christ resides, to give his greatness to us.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, Amen.