

Not long after I moved to New York, I received an email from my friend Matt, alerting me—and presumably quite a few others, as well—that he and his wife had new phone numbers. Tongue in cheek, he noted that not only did they have new numbers, but they also had new phones—and not just any phones, but iPhones, which would now allow them, as he put it, “to sit at the cool kids’ table.”

Do you remember the first iPhone? In 2007, Apple introduced its new product, a mobile phone with touch controls and internet access, with this sentence: “iPhone ushers in an era of software power and sophistication never before seen in a mobile device, which completely redefines what users can do on their mobile phones.” Pretty cool, huh? No wonder my friend was excited; having purchased a mobile device of “power and sophistication,” he could sit at the cool kids’ table!

When do you get to sit at the cool kids’ table? Or do you sit at another table, watching the cool kids, wishing you could be one of them? Are there times when you buy a new piece of technology—or a new dress—or a new tool—so you can be cool? Apple and Microsoft and Google are adept at trying to convince you that you can’t be cool without their products. So are Dewalt and Stanley and Ryobi; they work hard to persuade you that only their tools can put you in the cool kids’ club on your block. The ad-writers for all these companies lean on our penchant for wanting to be cool, to have the latest gadget before others do, to sit at the cool kids’ table.

In today’s gospel lesson, Jesus warns his disciples against getting too excited about being a “cool kid.” James and John come to him, apparently privately, maybe whispering, saying, “Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you.” When Jesus asks them to elaborate, they respond, “Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory.” James and John most likely think that Jesus will soon take over the government of ancient Palestine, and they ask that, when he takes his throne, he will put them at his right and his left, to give them positions of authority, to name them to his “cabinet,” so to speak. James and John want to sit at the cool kids’ table with Jesus.

James and John are certainly not the last of Jesus’ disciples to assume that they will get to sit at the cool kids’ table. Over the 2,000-plus years of Christianity, there have been many followers of Jesus who have argued over who sits closer to Jesus, who have considered themselves to be more right or more righteous than others, who have wished to be “great.” Can you think of any examples?

Here’s one. In the early church, in the middle of the first century, some argued over the issue of circumcision as a requirement for following Jesus. In Acts 15, we learn that “certain individuals came down from Judea and were teaching..., ‘Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.’” The “circumcision party,” as Paul called them, already sat at the cool kids’ table. They didn’t wish to be great; they knew they were great; they knew their stance was right and the others’ was wrong. And they wanted only people who were like them (that is, men who were circumcised) to sit at table with them. Paul traveled to Jerusalem in an attempt to resolve this conflict. By the end of the meeting, he and Peter and the other disciples had agreed not to require circumcision as a mark of discipleship. They decided that they could all sit at the cool kids’ table with Jesus.

Not all church arguments have ended with agreement, however. Over and over, the church has experienced conflict and schism over theological issues. In 1054, the church split into two hemispheres (East and West) because of three conflicts: 1) the supremacy of Peter; 2) the bread for communion; and 3) one word in the Nicene Creed. Let's look at these conflicts one at a time.

### **The Supremacy of Peter**

The Western Roman Catholic Church considered Peter to be the supreme apostle, while the Eastern Orthodox Church thought of both Peter and Paul as pre-eminent apostles. The Roman church deemed Peter to be the first bishop and a prototype of the pope, thus according the pope supreme authority, while the Orthodox church thought of Peter as one leader among many, with whom he shared authority.

### **Leavened or Unleavened Bread**

While the Orthodox church used bread made with yeast for communion, the Roman church used only unleavened bread. The Roman church, associating unleavened bread with Israel's "old" covenant, chose yeasted bread according to the "new" covenant of Jesus.

### **The Nicene Creed**

When we recite the Nicene Creed, in the Third Article, on the Holy Spirit, we say, "who proceeds from the Father and from the Son." In the original Greek text of the Creed, the Eastern church recited only "from the Father." The Roman church, however, used a Latin version of the Creed with the term "filioque," which means "and from the Son." This prompted endless theological debates.

On each of these three issues, both East and West were insistent about being right; each claimed that they were "great" before Jesus and that the other side was not. Because these arguments could not be resolved, the church split into Eastern Orthodox and Western Catholic branches in the "Great Schism" of Christian history in 1054. Both churches thought that they were right, and that, because they were the cool kids, Jesus would seat them—and not the other Christians—at his right and his left.

Five hundred years after the Great Schism into East and West, Martin Luther attempted to reform the Roman Catholic Church, but his efforts elicited deep and dangerous conflict. Luther thought he was right, but so did the pope. The pope burned Luther's books, and Luther burned the papal edict excommunicating him. Once again, the church split asunder, part of it remaining faithful to the Roman Church, and part of it following Luther's lead. Disciples in both the Roman Church and the Lutheran Church thought of themselves as "great," as "right;" neither side hesitated to assume that Jesus would let them—and not the others—sit with him.

Another five hundred years and more conflict, this time in our ELCA—that's "Evangelical Lutheran Church in America." Formed in 1988 through a merger of three Lutheran denominations—the LCA, of which King of Kings was a member, the ALC, and the AELC, the three churches were stirred into the "alphabet soup" of the new ELCA! During the formation stage, there was conflict over how to interpret Scripture and how the new church should do its business. A couple of years later, conflict erupted over what sort of relationship the ELCA should have with the Episcopal Church. Some were sure

that we could follow practices of the Episcopal Church and still be faithful to our Lutheran heritage; others argued that such practices would put our Lutheran identity in jeopardy. And then there was an even deeper conflict: over gay marriage and gay ordination. Faithful Lutherans on both sides of each of these conflicts were quite sure that they were right—and that the other side was wrong. Our inability to figure out how to live together as Christians who disagree with one another led to diminishment of our church. Just like the conflicts between Eastern and Western Christianity in 1054 and between the Roman Church and the Protestants in the 16<sup>th</sup> century ended in splits, so this controversy has split the ELCA. Since 1987, prior to the inception of the ELCA, over 500 congregations have left to join splinter Lutheran denominations, and 500 more have closed. ELCA membership has shrunk from seven million to four million.

James' and John's request to sit at Jesus' left and right, at the cool kids' table, has been echoed in our ELCA squabbles as well as in other conflicts throughout Christian history. While the brothers' request seems a bit presumptuous to us, we can certainly understand their desire to be seated with Jesus. Like us, like Peter and Paul, like the disciples in the Eastern Church and the Western Church, like Martin Luther and the Pope, like those in the ELCA who support gay marriage and those who are opposed, the disciples in today's story long to be chosen, to be honored, to be included, to belong, to matter. Maybe James and John make this request of Jesus because they just want to know that they matter to him. And maybe the only way they know how to express their desire for belonging is to act like they're important—and hope that Jesus will treat them accordingly.

But instead of treating James and John as important, Jesus points out that it is not within his authority to grant them to sit at his right hand and his left. He describes greatness not as prominence or significance or importance, but, rather, as humble service. The one who would be “great,” Jesus explains, does not lord it over others or act as a tyrant among them. Instead, 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. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.”

What do you think it mean to be “great”? According to Jesus, who always seems to be turning things upside-down, being great means acting humbly, not looking upon others with jealousy or judgment, not expecting to sit at the cool kids' table. It means accepting yourself as you are, with your strengths and weaknesses, your gifts and challenges—and accepting others as they are—and being willing to share your gifts with them—and receiving the gifts they have for you! It means being content with your life, not being envious or haughty, but giving thanks for all that you have received and being willing to share it. It means being aware of what needs to be healed or improved in your own life, being willing to change, and seeking help when needed, whether you're in the midst of a financial crisis or marital strife or an addiction or poor self-esteem—and it means to be willing to reach out to others to invite them to change. It means expecting not to be served, but, rather, to serve.

In the end, my friends, it's not so important that you are important. It doesn't matter if you are “great” or “right.” It doesn't matter if you sit at Jesus' right hand or his left. Because accolades are not the currency of God's love. You can't measure God's love by whether or not you get good grades, by

whether you have a good-looking significant other, by whether you have the right technology or the right deodorant or the right car, by whether or not you get chosen for the lead in the play or as forward on the basketball team, by whether you get chosen for the promotion or the raise—or what your net worth is—or how many people you supervise. Accolades—or salaries—or “stuff”—or status—are not the currency of God’s love.

God’s love is not reserved for those who earn it, for those who are wise enough or strong enough or beautiful enough—or bold enough—to ask for it. Instead, God’s love is given, freely, to all who long for it. When any of us asks to sit at Jesus’ right or left, God says, as Jesus said to James and John, “My child, my beloved, I love you. I choose you. I honor you. I include you. You, dear child, belong to me. You, dearly beloved, matter to me. You are welcome, always, at my table, right here, next to me. But those others, too, are welcome here, right next to me. I need you to tell them. I need you to serve them, as I have served you. I need you to invite them, so that they, too, may sit at table with me.”

AMEN