My brothers and sisters in Christ, let us pray. Lord of our Hearts, Minds, Souls, and Spirits, may the words of my mouth and the meditation of all of our hearts always be acceptable in Your sight, our strength and our Redeemer, Amen.

James and John, our disciples in this week’s scripture who still don’t quite get it, have asked Jesus to sit at his right and left hand because they wanted power and prestige. Let’s be clear: they are men, after all, and they are probably after power, title, prestige, etc, and we have talked at length about this a couple of weeks ago. Men love hierarchies, and they love to be thought of as “in the know” or “in good favor” of the boss.

But in thinking about why they would do this only a few days after Jesus already went through with them this whole bit of them after they secretly argued amongst themselves which of them was the greatest, maybe there’s also another layer we don’t always think about.

In 1944, C. S. Lewis gave a talk to students at King’s College at Cambridge called “The Inner Ring,” about this longing to be safely inside imagined lines and walls of belonging. Inner rings exist **not** because of who is *inside* them but because of who is *kept out*. An inner ring creates and defines outsiders and then coddles insiders with special privileges and powers. For Lewis, in-groups are about not power but exclusivity. Here’s an excerpt from that talk.

 *“We hope, no doubt, for tangible profits from every Inner Ring we penetrate: power, money, liberty to break rules, avoidance of routine duties, evasion of discipline. But all these would not satisfy us if we did not get in addition the delicious sense of secret intimacy.”*

Maybe James and John wanted a “secret intimacy” with Jesus apart from the other disciples. What they imagine is less about them and more about Peter, Andrew, Philip, Nathaniel, Bartholomew, etc., and the look on their faces when they see they are not sitting next to Jesus in glory. Men like that too, having that “gotcha” moment and seeing others dumbfounded, eyes wide, mouth hanging open, given the audacity of what just happened, whether it’s an achievement or an event. Guys love juking friends and foes just for this purpose.

Now, we may laugh, hearing two disciples ask Jesus, like eight-year-olds, if they can sit with him up at the front and be his groupies. But don’t we all have ways we have chosen or longed to be part of inner rings in our own communities? Or even with God and the Holy?

Lewis, ever the erudite and articulate one, says we are “not longing for virtue or kindness or loyalty or humor or learning or wit or any of the things that can be really enjoyed. [We] merely [want] to be *in*.” That’s not how Jesus or the kingdom of God works, of course.

But we still try for that favored status. “You don’t know what you are asking”, says Jesus. “You haven’t thought this through, folks. You can’t drink the cup that I will have to drink” (meaning that God will show love best through suffering the most).

“We can, we can”, they assure him. They had even phrased their request, if you notice, as more of a command than a favor. “Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask”. Who says such a thing? Kids who are out of control of their parents. Actual teachers NEVER give into this kind of blackmail, and even Jesus reacts with how all 2nd grade teachers’ respond: “What do you want me to do for you?”

Even as we follow God and God’s teachings, we still essentially come back to what we expect of God: What will you do for us? All of the lesson of Isaiah 53, often called the Gospel of the Old Testament, is lost because we want to be glorified not just with God, but like God. We want to know that our efforts of years of attending church and doing good will get rewarded, and not just any recognition, but rewarded greatly.

It’s why American Christians are so focused on individual salvation. So we can see and feel that we have ours, but that others do not. Oh, happy day for us.

But that’s not biblical. And it’s not what Jesus ever says. Jesus does not promise that we will get rewards later, and that’s a good thing, because that means we can’t keep score now to figure out who’s best. The only thing Jesus wants from us right here, right now, is that we should give up any authority, and instead focus on what holds us back from that life of service. And for Jesus, it’s not an individual thing. It’s a collective thing.

Jesus came to save us ALL. Remember the sermon a few weeks ago? Whomever does something in the name of the One is for us, and cannot be condemned. What this says is that although we love the Jesus flavor of following God, God is bigger than Christianity. The Jews did not suddenly become God’s un-chosen people with the arrival of Jesus on the scene. God loves them just as they are, right here, right now, with equal favor.

We will disagree mightily about how religions fight amongst themselves over implementing and interpreting God’s love. But here in the United Church of Christ and at CCCG, we will not get into prioritizing one person over another on any terms, position, power, or standing. We say that because Jesus says that. All are equal. Period.

So the Zebedee brothers came with their shopping list of what they wanted to get, and to make up the seating arrangement in the heavenly banquet. Would we look like James and John in this passage if we had some of our prayer requests made public? Maybe the better test is how we respond to something that we believe is beyond our dignity. The question is: Did we show love?

I’ll leave you with these final thoughts.

Lewis said that “until you conquer the fear of being an outsider, an outsider you will remain.” This is true not only in Christianity but in human psychology. It is not inner rings but friendship and service that offer us real belonging. As Jesus explains in his reproach to James and John, the kingdom is not about who is in and who is out, nor is Christian greatness about who is on top and who is not. Glory and greatness in Christ come from seeing others, helping others, and loving others—as God in Christ sees, helps, and loves us. It means believing that we are **all** on the inside, even if we aren’t sure we—or our neighbor—is worth it.

Thanks be to God, Amen.