My brothers and sisters in Christ, let us pray. Our God of our hearts, minds, spirits, and souls, God of our dreams and hopes and possibilities for justice, peace, compassion, and mercy, 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.

Our much-anticipated election day is less than a month away now, where every four years people all over America vote for President. All the months of planning, preparation, advertising, name-calling, debating, conventioneering, and rallying will come to an end on Election day. For some that may be too soon, for most of us, it’s not soon enough.

Through all the words that have been used to describe the candidates—not just for President, mind you—one word that pervades our dialogue when it comes to considering important people and issues that they are involved with is “power”. What is it, exactly? I guess it depends on whether you’re in politics, then it’s the ability to influence peoples’ lives. Or music, and people look to you as a star to admire and follow. Or maybe business, and folks marvel at how you might have done something useful. Or an athlete and how people admire your commitment to being #1 in what you do.

Most folks who are at the top of their craft and industry these days have protection from bodyguards and ride around in bulletproof limos with tinted windows. Last year when I was in Washington DC, Vladimir Zelensky’s entourage whizzed by me 6 identical black SUVs and police blocking off the streets so they could get through unimpeded. In Venice, it was the Pope who pulled up in a, you guessed it, fancy water taxi with blacked out windows. Those are sure signs that they have power, and that people wanna get near them. Don’t know why, but folks who have power always have others who want to have their picture taken with them, or an autograph given as a keepsake. Something they have might rub off on us if we can only touch the one with power and have them notice us.

And while we think of all this as a recent phenomenon, it’s been going on forever, because the game of who gets to be in charge never stops. But every once in a while, some unexpected powerless person breaks through, channeling our hopes that they won’t let power get to them, that they will change things for the better, do right by everyone, altruistically. It’s why we campaign for them. We want our person to sit at the head of the table and do what we want, make good for us. And we hope that they don’t get ruined by power.

So now that we’ve set the scene, let’s turn our attention to the Zebedee brothers. There’s not an election in Galilee, but we can see this as God’s election day coming up, and their guy Jesus is coming into his own to be at the top of the heap, so they think. Jesus has told them that he will be put to death, but this isn’t registering with these guys who want to see Jesus’ power fulfilled and what it could mean for them. He’s going to be glorified, he says, and as far as they’re concerned, he has shown he has power over people, healing, teaching, and they want to be part of it.

“Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask.” Turns out they want top cabinet posts, sitting as close to Jesus as they can, to be close to power. Is it ambition? Faith? Maybe both. But despite Jesus’ warnings, they’re so sure of Jesus’ power to direct events they wanna know that since they have put in the work they now want their reward.

And why not? Isn’t this what close friends do, stick together, reward loyalty? They’re the ones Jesus takes with them, along with Peter, on the cool stuff like the Transfiguration. But Jesus will ask them again and again whether they know what they’re asking for. “We can, we can drink the cup, whatever it is! We’re here for you.”

They’re expecting power in the way they’ve seen it in this world, in their lives and experience. This new kingdom Jesus talks about will sweep out the bad guys, the new order comes in, new leadership installed, Jesus at the head and the most loyal followers at his right and left. And then they can start to redeem the world with Jesus on top, but they’re as close as they can get to the power that will surely be coming into the world. Right?

“It doesn’t work that way”, Jesus says yet again. The powerful ones are not even at the table. They’re the quiet ones who are refilling water glasses while the blustery ones compete for position. The great ones at the banquet are hardly seen, but they’re preparing ham & bean soup in the kitchen, cleaning plates and pots, clearing silverware for the next course, dressed so that they do not draw attention to themselves. Servants look after others first, second, and third, seeking to comfort others before their own needs are even considered.

We’ve heard this so many times it washes over us and we rarely take it in and act on it. The end of the line is the best place to be. The job no one wants is the one that should be taken. Lovers of God get less status, not more; less recognition, not credit; yet are more joyous and happy. That’s quite the opposite from the world we live in, and it seemed that way for the Zebedee brothers. They were learning all this as some sort of selflessness boot camp, doing their time as servants and no complaining so they could win the prime seats in Kingdom come.

“It doesn’t work that way”, Jesus says. He’s not being a servant to sort out who’s who, then whip off his tunic to reveal the royal robes and ascend to the throne. He’s a servant from the start. Jesus makes clear the good seats are not his to give. Even he doesn’t have one. Someone else has the seating chart, and he won’t name who that is, but Jesus is happy just to humbly serve.

I’ll leave you with these final thoughts.

There is no merit or status reward in God’s kingdom. Jesus has just told us that we’ll end up with persecutions a-plenty. Jesus is not in it for reward, but the love of God. And you know what? The seat Jesus gets in this world ends up being suffering and death from the royal-robed ones.

The ones seated to his right and left are not even disciples, but Dismas and Gestas, common thieves who have done some really bad things to this point in their lives. And yet, they too find Jesus’ favor. This is tough stuff, hard to understand, that we want to know the rules of God’s power so that we can figure it out and how it can work for us. But James, John, Peter, none of them got it, and I don’t know that we can know any better than they did.

This much we do know, however. Jesus is still serving, feeding, giving to us. That’s the power he lets us see, so maybe we can figure out that mystery and emulate in serving feeding and giving from ourselves, too. It’s not up to us to make sense of it, serving from the bottom up to transform the world. Maybe we should call it trickle-up economics, would that make it clearer? The world would laugh if we did. And maybe that’s the point and the ultimate power God gives us: the power to serve and turn the Zebedee question around, as Jesus does so many times. Let’s ask this:

“Teacher, how may we do for you whatever you ask of us?”

Thanks be to God, Amen.