

22 Pentecost Mark 10:35-45
Christ and Grace October 21, 2018
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Some of us here may be old enough to remember when car safety was not a thing - before seatbelts, before car safety seats for children, before airbags. Back in the day no one thought twice about letting children sit in the front seat. I remember the fierce competition with my sister to see who got to sit in the front seat. I was older so was awarded the seat of honor more than my sister, even though our parents tried to make us take turns. Age was power and privilege back then. And our little brother almost always had to sit in the back seat.

In today's Gospel, James and John are arguing about where they will sit in the kingdom because they think that some seats are more important than others. And the other disciples are not too happy about James' and John's plans to take the best seats. They all seemed to think that the closer you were to Jesus the more power and perks you would enjoy.

Jesus had to teach the disciples yet again, that he came to show them a different kind of power – one of service, one of vulnerability, a power that was greatest when it was given up to help those who were powerless. Jesus made it pretty clear that power and wealth were not free passes to heaven in last week's Gospel in his conversation with the rich ruler. Jesus spent his days modeling a life of humility and giving. For Jesus, a holy life had little to do with where you sat, and everything to do with how you showed love. It was seen in how he helped others, included others, fed others and healed others.

So here we all are, sitting, in our pews – on the right and on the left. The history of the church pew is really interesting. The earliest churches had no pews at all, but were open space and everyone stood for worship, sometimes kneeling during parts of the service. Churches didn't have permanent pews until around the time of the Protestant Reformation. The rise of the sermon as a central act of Christian worship, made the pew a standard item of church furniture. Long-winded preachers made pews a welcome addition for parishioners!

In some churches, pews were paid for by the parishioners, and were their personal property. When the pews were privately owned, their owners sometimes enclosed them in lockable pew boxes. You can see pews like these at Bruton Parish in Williamsburg. Until the early twentieth century, it was common practice to rent pews in churches to families or individuals as a principal means of raising income to maintain the church. This was especially common in the United States where, unlike in Europe, churches lacked government support through mandatory tithing. (you were wondering how I was going to get stewardship into this sermon, weren't you?)

Most of us have our favorite place to sit in church, so let's expand this pew metaphor a bit. It's a longstanding tradition among churchgoers to sit in the same place Sunday after Sunday. It's just what we do! We have a specific spot on a specific pew, and everything experienced during the worship service comes from the vantage point of that seat: the view of the pulpit or communion table; the sound of the music; the surrounding people, who also sit in the same place Sunday after Sunday.

In time, our worship becomes tied to that spot, so much so that if asked or forced to move, or heaven forbid a visitor sits in our pew, we may undergo a crisis of faith right there in front of God and everybody. I confess that whenever I return to Redeemer in Midlothian I make a beeline to my former pew!

If we extend the pew metaphor even farther, beyond the pew to all the things we do in church, we might notice that we can get stuck in our pews, set in our ways. We can compare it to long-held traditions, the way we've always done things, programs and worship styles, Lenten practices, mission projects, you name it.

So, let's talk about your pew. What does it mean to call it your pew? Did you pay for it or build it? Is it yours and yours alone? If you find that you stare or glare at anyone—friend or stranger—who sits in your pew, or if you sit at the very end and block passage to anyone willing to sit in the middle of the pew, you might have pew control issues!

What if instead of seeing our pew as our property, we saw it as our responsibility? How are we using our pew? Are we using our pew for our own benefit and comfort? Or are we using our pew to draw others to Christ? Do we go out and invite new people to come to worship and sit with us? How can we make our pew the most inviting place in the entire sanctuary? What would that look like?

Remember, our pew can be a metaphor. It represents our power, personality and possessions. Our pew represents our time, talent and treasure. It represents all God has given us—which is everything—to be used for God's glory.

If you are willing to try something new, sit in a different pew. Experience worship from a different perspective, be open to the possibility that change can be good. We don't require anyone to pay for a pew at Christ and Grace. The pews here are free, just like God's grace. But we do practice the stewardship of caring for the pews, for the people sitting in them, and for the building that holds us all. The church today supports its ministries with pledges, not pew rents. Pledging helps the Vestry plan and fund new ways for us to carry out our mission of hope, healing and hospitality.

James and John expected the kingdom to be a certain way, the way they saw it from where they wanted to sit. Jesus had a far greater vision and perspective. The kingdom James and John expected is not the one they got, and this is true for us. Life is different, culture is changing, and yet the call to follow Jesus remains the same. How will we be disciples on the right and left of Jesus? Sitting in the same old place, or getting up and following Jesus on the way? Amen.¹

¹ For information and thoughts about pews I am indebted to Wikipedia and Eric Black https://www.baptiststandard.com/opinion/editorials/lets-talk-your-pew/?fbclid=IwAR2mu3F_RF5L1mHN_nu8sygRfmMuI-bHybOgv93O2nnn_ehSGB3BVAqbWQ