

The inner circle (Mark 10:35–45)

James and John don't want power; they want a special level of intimacy with Jesus.

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When I was newly ordained, I learned the name of every priest in my diocese. More than a decade later, I am not so familiar—or so zealous. A plausible excuse could be the many comings and goings of clergy each year. Or that as I enter my fifth decade, my memory is shrinking.

More likely, I'm afraid, is that I have become an established old snob; I don't feel social pressure to meet and get to know new clergy neighbors (even though when I do, I enjoy them!). This is social laziness, but also social privilege. I know I belong and so am less likely to reach out and help others feel that they belong, too. Sometimes, I might even relish an inside joke or a good laugh with other, longtime clergy friends at a gathering, showing publicly that I am in a group with a shared intimacy while (gulp) others are not. This is not Christlike behavior.

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: "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.”

James and John may have asked Jesus to sit at his right and left hand because they wanted power and prestige, but I wonder if they wanted a “secret intimacy” with Jesus apart from the other disciples. What they imagine is less about them and more about Peter, Andrew, James the Less, etc., and the look on their faces when they see they are *not* sitting next to Jesus in glory.

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? As Lewis puts it, 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.

Lewis says 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 underfoot. 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.