

“The Need to Feel Important: A Curse Cured”
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Hickory Neck Episcopal Church – Toano, Virginia
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Matthew 21:1-11; Philipians 2:5-11; Matthew 26:14 – 27:66

Judas must have felt like an important man when he went to the chief priests to betray Jesus. He was now part of a real-life, big-time conspiracy. Who knows why he did it. Maybe Judas was a disgruntled disciple, who felt underappreciated, or maybe he was just plain greedy, or maybe Judas thought that triggering a crisis would cause Jesus to become the type of fighting, killing, conquering Messiah that everyone had anticipated for such a long time. It doesn't matter, really. When he saw what was happening, Judas either felt remorse over his deeds or suddenly realized that he had misjudged the situation badly and was in way over his head. He gave the thirty pieces of silver back, but it didn't matter. It was already too late. Judas had served his purpose. His objections were considered unimportant.

The disciples had to feel immensely important, too, especially after that triumphal entry into Jerusalem. As emissaries of Jesus, they found a man to send a horse for that thrilling ride. Then later they went on a mission to find someone who had reserved a room for their Passover feast. A disciple arrives and conveys the message, “The Lord needs it,” or “The Teacher says,” and voila. It must have been a heady little rush of power to make things happen with a handful of somebody else's words.

When Jesus told them that they would all run away, each denied it bravely, declaring that they would willingly die with Jesus, as if that would have made any difference. Jesus needed witnesses, not martyrs. When Jesus brought three of them with him to a secluded place where he could pray, none of them even managed to stay awake. If you can't stay awake for an hour, how could you hope to endure danger and pain?

In the end, each one of them did exactly as Jesus predicted. When the authorities arrived, after a brief fit of violence, which Jesus condemned, they scattered to the wind. Only Peter summoned the courage to follow the crowd to see what would happen, and even he faltered, denying Jesus three times. The threat of prison or worse got the better of him. By dawn of Good Friday, not a single one of the remaining eleven disciples felt important. They felt scared and confused.

Certainly, the chief priests and the elders felt important. After all, they were the leaders of the people, the arbiters of the holy Law, but their position of importance was threatened by this radical rabbi named Jesus, so they conspired to kill him. At his late night trial, they struggled to find reliable witnesses against him.

Finally, the high priest put the question plainly to Jesus, “Are you the Messiah, the Son of God?” Jesus replied, “You have said so,” and added a quote from Daniel. That was enough. When morning came, time to see the Roman governor, Pilate. Those religious elites were important enough to demand an impromptu meeting with the most important person in Jerusalem, but not important enough to kill on their own authority.

Pilate definitely felt important. He had the power of life and death over everyone in his domain, and he used that power ruthlessly. Of chief concern to Pilate in this scenario was whether or not Jesus constituted a political threat to the established Roman order. He couldn't have cared less about Jesus' religious sensibilities, except to the extent to which those sensibilities might create unrest. So when Pilate examined Jesus, he found no reason to crucify him.

He tried to use a backdoor out of this unpleasant, time-consuming distraction. Put Jesus up for the Passover parole against someone so dangerous and detestable that the crowd would set

Jesus free. It was a neat way to resolve a tense situation, but it didn't work. The chief priests managed to rile up the crowd against Jesus. Pilate saw a riot in the making, and that made the decision for him. I'm sure he felt very important and powerful in that moment, realizing that his effort to set Jesus free had failed. No, it was the crowd who got away feeling important that day. They got to decide who went free and who died.

The Roman soldiers felt important, or at least superior to Jesus, a man condemned to death. They beat him and mocked him, a mere warm-up for the horrors to come on Golgotha. However, when Jesus died, an earthquake started. His executioners saw that as an omen. "Truly this man was God's Son!" I wonder if they still felt important and superior after that experience.

The chief priests and elders definitely felt important and vindicated, because they won, and to insure their victory, they even appealed to Pilate for a guard on the tomb, to prevent any fraud perpetrated by the disciples, who they feared would steal the body to proclaim Jesus resurrected. Nothing really shook their sense of importance: not the earthquake or the reports of the Resurrection.

It took another forty years or so, before they found what they considered to be a viable Messiah, a man who could lead men into battle and win, until they lost, which eventually they did. Jerusalem, including the Temple, was dismantled stone by stone in 70 A.D. Without a temple, chief priests don't feel important at all.

The thing about people who need to feel important is that when their importance gets threatened, they do one of two things. They either fight like hell, or they look for a convenient way to avoid the threat. Both maneuvers are intended to preserve a privileged position, whether that position is a role of authority, the appearance or feeling of being important, or simply staying alive. We live in a world full of people who need to feel important. It's almost human

nature. To some degree, everyone wants to feel important, to be acknowledged as important by others, and is ready to defend that important feeling from diminishment. Or rather, I should say, that's true for all but one.

In everything Jesus said or did, throughout this lengthy narrative, full of important-feeling characters, he doesn't seem to need that. Consider this. Jesus gathers his twelve closest followers for a sacred supper only to announce that one of them will betray him. Anyone who wants to be thought of as important knows that if a disciple plans to betray you, that disloyalty represents a big hit to your importance. But then to share that information with the whole group, not in an effort to stop the betrayer, but just so they'll know? It's a revelation of weakness.

With the group already anxious, Jesus told the disciples, "You will all become deserters because of me this night." Now that's a prediction a person will keep to themselves if they want to feel important and be perceived as important. It's not a popular accusation to make, and it reveals even more clearly how bad things are. Then there's, "I am deeply grieved, even to death; remain here, and stay awake with me." Wow. Certainly, his fears were justified. But to a person who values feeling important, nothing justifies sharing your fears with others, unless you plan to conspire with them to bring down the person who frightens you.

Then Jesus goes to pray. "My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; yet not what I want but what you want." "My Father, if this cannot pass unless I drink it, your will be done." Those prayers are sublime humility, bringing to mind Paul's statement about Jesus from his Letter to the Philippians. "Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave."

Interrogated by an insulting, insular clique, Jesus stood silently, save for two sentences, and in Pilate's presence, he uttered three words. A person who felt important would make their

case, or at least disgorge some sort of verbal manifesto for sake of posterity, but not Jesus. He never pled his innocence, even though innocent he was. He never begged for his life, never issued threats or warnings. He didn't answer the taunts coming up from the foot of the cross. That silence echoes across the ages, and always will.

Out of all the people who felt important, for one reason or another – Judas, the disciples, the chief priests and elders, Pilate, the crowd, the soldiers – Jesus stands at the center, not because he felt important, but because he was important. In fact, Jesus is only truly essential human being who ever lived. His example is instructive.

People who need to feel important make mistakes, frequently mistakes that hurt other people, because their need drives them in the wrong direction. And when something or someone threatens that feeling of importance, such people become afraid and either play rough and dirty or disengage from the situation in hopes that the threat will disappear. Disaster usually ensues. Yet in all the intervening centuries, among the many amazing discoveries and inventions that have come along, the one vital thing the human race has consistently failed to learn is how to repent from destructive desire to feel important.

Needing to feel important is ridiculous, because if you are important, if you know in your bones that you are important, you don't need to feel important. Feeling important is transient, fleeting. It relies on the opinions of others. It's the first cousin of arrogance. Being important endures, because that comes from God, and from nowhere else. And Jesus, who apparently felt no need to feel important, since he was important, died to reveal a crucial fact. All of God's children are important, including you and me. Jesus wouldn't have suffered the thorns and the lashes and the nails and the spitting if we were unimportant. You are important; important enough to Jesus for him to die.

When you know that you are important, you don't need to conspire against others who threaten your need to feel important or to work and cheat the system. You don't need to live in fear and run away and hide or assault people with verbal or physical violence. When you know that you are important, you don't need to pretend to be someone you aren't. You don't need to worry too much what others might think. You just need to be your best self, and if that hunger to feel important starts gnawing at you, embrace the real thing. Look at a cross, any cross, and remember that you are important – not superior or privileged or entitled – but important enough for Jesus to die for you. Amen.