

Twenty-Second Sunday after Pentecost, Year B
The Rev. Ian Burch
St. Mark's Episcopal Church | Milwaukee, WI
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I want you to cast your mind back to that first resume you ever wrote. For some, it might be recent. For others of us, it has been awhile. I want you to think about sitting there at a typewriter or a computer, trying to turn three summers selling the blizzards at the Dairy Queen and a brand-new degree in Art History into something resembling a skill set that businesses would want to employ.

Some people might say that these resume embellishers are being deceitful. And I can appreciate that; in a technical sense, exaggerating your accomplishments is a lie.

On the other hand, I have to admire the pluck that some young people have. To say that one summer of camp counseling was really an Internship in Interpersonal Management. Or to say that working at the Gap was really a Vernacular Fashion Fellowship takes courage we miss when we're busy moralizing.

James and John, who I imagine were about 22 and just wrapping up their Anthropology degrees at Brown, come to Jesus and ask him to crown them in glory. This is a bit like an intern asking the CEO for a corner office, I imagine. And Jesus explains to James and John that they have no idea what it is they're asking. Can they drink the cup that Jesus will be asked to drink? Can they be baptized in the same way that Jesus was baptized? We, the audience, know of course that the answer is no. No one can accept the responsibilities that the Son of Man assumed when he walked this earth.

But, when asked, the brothers answer Jesus: "we are able." They actually say to the Son of Man that they can do what he asks. No problem. The church has often painted these brothers as arrogant or prideful. And maybe they were. But I prefer to think of them like that brand new college graduate who doesn't know enough of life yet to know that they might NOT be qualified for that job they're sure they can do if someone would just give them a chance.

James and John believe in the mission of Jesus. And, if they overestimate their own ability to follow him: so what? Who of us don't? It is supremely arrogant of us to stand here each Sunday morning and expect that the Holy Spirit will descend on our parish and invigorate our community and our ministry. And it's arrogant of us to think that Jesus will arrive week after week in the broken bread at this table. And yet, we do it. A little arrogance isn't a bad thing.

In a way, James and John are the models of the Christian life. We come to Jesus week after week, year after year, and say, "we can do what you ask of us." When that, of course, isn't true. We break our covenants. We hurt others, hurt ourselves, turn away from God. And then we come back the next week and promise to follow Jesus again.

Maybe it's arrogant, but maybe a better way to think of it is hopeful. Hopeful like that college kid who wants her big break. James and John are the patron saints of abundant, foolish, hope. Imagine if all Christians had that courage? What could we accomplish?

I'm not sure where the lines between hope and foolishness or hope and arrogance are drawn. Maybe the lines are unimportant. Maybe all hope is a little arrogant; maybe all hope is a little foolish. I certainly think that way when we launch our Stewardship campaign every year. I think: that there is no possible way that a group of people can voluntarily raise enough money to resource a dozen ministries, a growing staff, a hundred-year-old church building, all while supporting local and international diocesan ministries. It's impossible. It'll never work.

And yet, year after year of its existence, St. Mark's has relied on the generous gifts of its members to fund ministries for the healing of the people inside the walls and for the healing of people outside the walls. It's crazy to think that our business plan is just to be generous every year. No corporation would run that way. But it's worked for a century and a quarter, and I have every confidence that it will work again for the 2019 campaign.

Try to access your inner James and John. Come to Jesus with the overwhelming confidence of the 22-year-old. I know you'll probably fall short of your goal of following. You know you'll probably fall short of your goal of following. God knows you'll probably fall short of your goal of following.

It doesn't matter. Come boldly anyway. Martin Luther said, "Sin boldly; but have faith more boldly still." That could be the motto for James and John. It should be ours too. Amen.