In your life have you ever encountered pure unapologetic selfish ambition?

Maybe it was someone you knew in school, or a coworker who did anything to anybody in order to gain some advantage, to be promoted, or to take credit for another’s work. Maybe... Sadly... it was a person at church that used their position for personal gain.

I think we have all experienced ambitious people who grasp at power.

In today’s Gospel Lesson we read an interaction between Jesus and his disciples. James and his brother John wanted to make a power play and asked to be honored in Christ’s kingdom, once he becomes a King. They ask: “Grant us to sit at your right hand and one at your left, in your Glory.”

They were asking to be his left and right hand man, his #1 and #2 officer’s in the Kingdom! They wanted to be the Kings’ governors!

Jesus responded graciously and said that they did not know what they were asking. He said:

“You know that among the gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them.” Mark 10:42.

The Memory of Pompey’s conquering of Judea, and the domination of Caesar Augustus was not far from the minds of Jesus’ disciples. And in the intervening next 20 years they lived through the reign of Tiberius, Caligula, Claudius, and the famed brutality of Nero before Mark took out his pen to write his gospel.

Today we really are no different. We have the North Korean dictator Kim Jong-un who grasps power in the world with his continued threat of nuclear warfare. We have the Russian President Vladimir Putin with his internal political maneuvering grasping at power internally by threatening force outside in the Ukraine and now Syria, always trying to grasp regional power and gain hegemony at home and abroad.

America really is no different. Even as a democratic republic we have two political parties that promote their agenda over the good of the nation - all as a means of Grasping and holding power within our country.
But Christ tells us that this grabbing for power and glory is not what he has in mind for his disciples. He tells them:

“But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all.” Mark 10:43-44.

Yet every church I have been involved in since I became a Christian has had its share of selfish politics... people desiring and grasping for power... ruling over others with pride and vanity. I have seen it in the ladies church guild, in the choir, in the deacons- people who’s very name means servant, and even in the elders who often on their knees with penitent tears, greedily grasp for power within the church.

Even Chaplains have this fault. I know in my own heart I struggle with the desire to grasp for power. I remember in 2003, the same year I was commissioned a chaplain I was to be promoted to CDR, but instead I put on the LT shoulder boards of a Chaplain. That same year I attended with my classmates the commissioning ceremony of the USS Mason, DDG-87. My class sponsored the wardroom and we were guests of the ship that day. As my class was being piped aboard the Bos’in pulled me out of the line and said LT you need to wait for all the CDRs to get aboard. It hurt, they were my classmates.

I still feel that pain in my weak heart. I long for rank and recognition. I long to grasp at power. I long to have authority and rule over others. My heart does not want to be a servant.

I have realized that I will never have the opportunity to make the rank of Captain. This also pains my heart that longs for success. Subconsciously I feel that if I gain a particular rank I will have been confirmed as being successful. I look at my classmates who have made Captain and wish I had made different decisions. I look at my classmates who have made Rear Admiral and long for the power and recognition that they have earned. My heart desires this success.

But real success in the eyes of God and our Lord Jesus Christ is measured not by the yardstick of power and authority but by Love, Humility, and a self-sacrificial servants’ heart. When I look back at all that grasping for power – the desire in my heart, I am left feeling totally inadequate before Christ.
43But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, 44and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. 45For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many. Mark 10:43-45

Jesus calls us here to not allow our hearts the opportunity to grasp at power or even to desire it. Rather he calls us to a higher standard of selfless love, to think less of ourselves and more of others. He then made himself an example for us to follow by giving himself up as a ransom for many.

The Apostle Paul in his letter to the Philippians makes this point so clear as he expresses the extent of Christ’s humiliation in saving us.

Do nothing from selfishness or conceit, but in humility count others better than yourselves. 4 Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. 5 Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, 6 who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, 7 but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. 8 And being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross. Philippians 2:3-8 RSV

Christ, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped...

The word translated grasped in the RSV is ἁρπαγμός harpagmos: (har-pag-mos‘) the act of seizing or the thing seized.

There are two ways in which this word is used...

First we grasp at things that we do not have, we reach out as to take hold of things, to take hold of power and the other vain glories of this life. We are always reaching for that which we do not have.

But Christ already had all power and Glory in his hand. As the eternal Word of God, creator of all things, he was already equal with God in all respects. He grasped all power and all glory firmly in his hand. But in not counting his equality a thing to be grasped... he opened his hand and let it go. Christ did not regard equality with God something to be held onto, but rather he emptied himself and took on the nature of a servant, in Philippians a doulos, a slave, and gave himself up as a ransom for the people of this world.

How can I compare myself to that?
How can I compare my heart that grasps at... selfishly desires power and glory... how can I compare myself to Christ who gave it all up for us? How can I ever fulfill the call of Christ and be humble as he was humble? To Love others before myself? How can I abandon my selfish heart's desire and become the servant that Christ wants me to be?

*Only through the power of Christ who still serves us!*  

Jesus promised us that when he left this earth he would send us a counselor, the Holy Spirit that would have power to change our hearts toward him and away from the world. He said to us in the Gospel of John:

**John 14:15-17** If you love me, you will keep my commandments. 16 And I will pray the Father, and he will give you another Counselor, to be with you forever, 17 even the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him; you know him, for he dwells with you, and will be in you.

*And still in the context of love and obedience he continues...*

**John 14:26-27** But the Counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you. 27 Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid.

Here in the context of love and obedience Christ gives us and our stubborn hearts the provision for obedience through the power of the Holy Spirit and a guarantee of Peace. How can we ever fulfill the call of Christ to be humble and become the servant of all? We do it by resting in his work in our lives, the power of the Holy Spirit to change our hard hearts, love him, obey him, love others before ourselves, and ultimately receive the peace that surpasses understanding. Never fearing, never doubting our own salvation.

May God richly bless you in the hearing of his word and the comfort of the Gospel through the power of the Holy Spirit, Amen.