

"Empowered by God's Grace to Serve,"

Mark 10:35-45, Stewardship 3, Nov. 15, 2015

Have you ever stopped to think of the many, many questions that people have either asked of Jesus, or may have paused long enough to ask one another about Jesus, when he lived among us here on this earth—in what theologians refer to as "his state of humiliation?" Hundreds of questions people either asked of Jesus directly, or ask of each other about Jesus, are still preserved by God's grace for us in the New Testament today!

Some of these questions people asked were: **Who can forgive sins but God alone? Do you not care that we are perishing? Who then is this that even the wind and the waves obey him? Is not this the carpenter, the son of Joseph and Mary whose father and mother we know? What must I do to inherit eternal life? Who then can be saved?**

In today's Gospel, however, that role is **reversed**. Though two of Jesus' disciples came up to him initially with a **most unusual request**: **"Teacher we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you!"** as if they were asking our Lord to give them whatever they wanted, with no questions asked but **carte blanche** for sure, **Jesus was not willing to make of himself a heavenly vending machine just yet!** Jesus chooses instead to ask them very specifically: **"What do you want me to do for you?"**

And the two sons of Zebedee, James and John reply in a lovely unison: **"Grant us to sit, one at your right hand, and one at your left hand in your glory" (v. 37)!**

But Jesus answers them by saying: **"You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or to be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized?"**

And immediately we can witness some hard evidence that they did not know what they were asking because they casually replied, **"We are able" (v. 39)!** **Then Jesus said to them, "The cup that I drink you will drink, and with the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized, ⁴⁰ but to sit at my right hand or at my left is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared."**

For the third time now in Mark's Gospel Jesus has just predicted his own death and resurrection, supplying us with more of the specific details than he gave us in those first two predictions! Our Lord says: **"See we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be delivered over to the chief priests and the scribes and they will condemn him to death and deliver him over to the Gentiles. And they will mock him and spit on him, and flog him and kill him. And after three days he will rise!" (Mark 10:33-34)**

How in the world could James and John have been listening to what Jesus has just said if in the very next breath, their personal concern was once again far more focused on caring for themselves rather than caring for Jesus or anyone else?

Brothers and sisters, at this point, these disciples certainly did not know what they were asking for, because while they indicated that what they wanted was a honored place alongside of Jesus in the spotlight, and hoping to receive it, by lobbying for the first and second cabinet positions in what they believed would be Jesus' new administration, Jesus was, in actuality, beginning his funeral procession toward that great and holy city of Jerusalem. While the disciples are dreaming very vividly in their own minds about an upcoming palatial banquet where they will publicly and joyfully celebrate their Lord's inauguration and coronation, if you please, what they know at this point, is that final destination eventually will be a place where two criminals are hanging, one on the right side and the other on the left side, on that old rugged cross where their dear Savior will be dying for them and for us! **Jesus is reminding us that this is where his royal glory will always take us in this life—to a cross; to his cross on which he the Prince of Glory died.**

The disciples were asking for something that they didn't even understand.

Many of us, as Jesus' followers alive in the world today, may still imagine that what we would like to have for ourselves above all else is glory, honor, power, wealth and riches; hoping to actually find ourselves one day at the very top of the heap, at the supreme apex of the pyramid, where we just might end up one day, but unfortunately and sadly enough all alone by ourselves, at the top but still very, very lonely!

The **Hollywood movie-star Jim Carey** once said, **"I think that everybody should one day get rich and famous and receive everything that they want for themselves in this life; everything that they have ever dreamed of, so that they will then be able to see that all of this is still not the answer—to our finding real meaning with a deep-seated purpose in life!"**

You know the old adage: Be careful what you ask for, because you very well may receive it. According to Denzel Washington, **"If you pray for rain, you will have to deal with the mud as well!"** And **"If you ask for a crown, there will also be a cross because there are no resurrections without crucifixions!"** This pursuit of power could very well be endemic of a present weakness on our part!

On the other hand, if you want glory in the Christian life, it will be gory. If you find yourself desiring to be on top, it may be like the top of a pyramid, where you are all alone by yourself—at the top, but terribly lonely. There may be a price to pay for which you will pay.

But before any of us adopt the foolish notion that we should jump on the bandwagon of thinking that **Jesus will do for us whatever it is that you or I want him to do for us**, so that prayer become an access to pull on the handle of a great slot machine of immense spiritual power, we should keep in mind that in the next few verses in Mark after our Gospel lesson today—Jesus goes on to ask this same question he has just asked of James and John of a blind man named Bartimaeus!

Just as Jesus asked James and John, **"What do you want me to do for you?"** so here also Jesus now asks this poor blind man: **"What do you want me to do for you?" (Mark 10:51)** And the **answer this blind man gave to Jesus was completely different than the answer that the two brothers who were the son of Zebedee gave to him, perhaps, just a few moments before!**

"What do you want me to do for you?" Jesus asked the blind man named Bartimaeus and the blind man understandably answers Jesus: **"Rabbi, let me see again!"** that is, **"Grant me the recovery of my sight" (Mark 10:51).** And the evangelist further tells us: **"And Jesus said to him: 'Go your way, your faith has made you well!' And immediately the blind man could see again and followed Jesus on his way!" (v. 52)**

Let's suppose that Jesus asked us not only as individuals, but also perhaps corporately as a church family today in this very hour, the same question that he first asked James and John, and then later in that same day, asked blind Bartimaeus: "What do you want me to do for you?"

Which answer would we give to Jesus, the answer of James and John, "Grant that in your glory one of us may sit at your right hand and one at your left!?" Or would we say, "Jesus let me see again! Rabbi, let me recover my sight!"

Too bad that the disciples request of Jesus was not, "Let us see again! Rabbi, let us recover our sight," because unfortunately they were blind, blind as a bat, and blind as Bartimaeus was blind, but they were not physically blind as Bartimaeus was physically blind, but they were spiritually, just as Bartimaeus had been spiritual blind before he both heard, and by the grace of God, came to believe for himself the Gospel! He must have come to believe on Jesus, and maybe even present that day to have heard Jesus prediction of his death and resurrection, just as James and John had heard Jesus, for at least he third time now, speak openly of his death and resurrection!

Maybe one prayer that every one of us would do well to ask our gracious God as we come forward to receive the Lord's body and blood again, which he offers us freely, according to his own promise, in our celebrations of Holy Communion, is "Lord, let me see again! Let me see what I really need in my life! Let me see what I should really be doing in the world for you! Let me see what real glory looks like in this earthly realm! Let me above all see the cost of glory and power that you paid on my behalf, before I start asking for it!

Our prayer should be the Bartimaeus petition: **"Let me see again!"** Let me recognize that your glory always manifests itself in selfless service to others; maybe even eventually dying ourselves to help others live and that to be "great" is to "serve," and to be "great" is to "love"! To be great is follow that very directive that the Prophet Micah gives to us in Micah 6:8, **"Do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with your God!"**

These are inspiring words that are also prefaced with a most beautiful and an extremely important question: **"With what shall I come before the LORD, and bow myself before God on high? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousands of rivers of oil? Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?" No, for he has told you, O man, what is good! And what does the LORD require of you? That you should "do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with your God!" (Micah 6:6-8)**

Maybe we should just pray, **"Let me see again." Let me see what I really need in my life. Let me see what I should really be doing in the world. Let me see what real "glory" really is. Let me see the cost of glory and power before I start asking for it. Let me see how my life that is now totally intertwined with eternal life, O blessed Savior, costs you your life!"**

And doesn't Jesus go on to show James and John where the road to true glory should always take them, and not only take them, but also take every one of us? Mark goes on to tell us that when: **"The ten remaining disciples heard about the brothers' attempt to profit from a game of one-upmanship over against all of them and they had become pretty "indignant," Mark tells us because of it, Jesus called all twelve of his disciples to him and said to them, "You know that those who are considered rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. But it shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant. And whoever would be first among you must be slave of all, just as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many!" (Mark 10:41-45)**

In a sermon on this Gospel lesson that was preached by the great civil rights leader, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. over 50 years ago, entitled: **"The Drum Major Instinct,"** Dr. King shared with his congregation that day something that he called Jesus' new definition of greatness. And as he was preaching with all of his heart and soul with which Dr. King always preached his sermons because the Spirit of God was also living inside of him, he said: **"Jesus' new definition of greatness means that everybody can be great because everybody can serve. You don't have to know about Plato and Aristotle to serve... You don't have to know the second law of thermodynamics to serve. You only need a heart full of grace, a soul generated by love."**

The greatness of God as it is still being constantly shown to all the world is manifest in Jesus' "gory glory" on a criminal's cross and could even be seen to a great degree on the night before his crucifixion when Jesus, their Lord and Master, took up the basin of water, girding the towel around his waist, and then lovingly washing his disciples' feet.

Brothers and sisters, to this very day, we still may have two very different and distinct answers to Jesus' same question that he put one day before James and John the sons of Zebedee, and only a short time later before that blind man whose name was Bartimaeus.

When Jesus asks them, "What do you want me to do for you!" the sons of Zebedee at this point still, though been following Jesus faithfully for three years now, were looking for an answer to that question that would only serve themselves, which the blind man was giving an answer to that question that would empower him by the grace of God to serve others!

Whenever we answer Jesus' question to us, "What do you want me to do for you?" with the answer: "Let me see again!" certainly Jesus will always continue to point us to his cross, because like the hymn writer Isaac said years over three centuries ago, it was:

**"At the cross, at the cross where I first saw the light,
and the burden of my heart rolled away!
It was there by faith I received my sight,
and now I am happy all the day!"**

Yet we can't underestimate what Jesus will do when we respond to his question, "What do you want me to do for you?" It takes courage to truly ask for what we need. Perhaps we don't think God will answer so we would rather not ask at all and build a steel wall of defense around our faith and heart. But as the song says, "If I never had a problem I wouldn't know God could solve them."

Prayer, telling Jesus what you need, is not a magic wand and prayer doesn't change God, it changes you and me. Prayer doesn't change things, God does. And Jesus is asking that question to all of us this morning, "What do you want me to do for you?"

When you respond, you might be surprised by the answer you receive.

I asked God for strength, that I might achieve, I was made weak, that I might learn humbly to obey. I asked for health, that I might do greater things, I was given infirmity, that I might do better things. I asked for riches, that I might be happy, I was given poverty, that I might be wise. I asked for power, that I might have the praise of others, but I was given weakness, that I might feel my need of God.... I asked for all things, that I might enjoy life, 3 I was given life, that I might enjoy all things. I got nothing that I asked for - But everything that I had hoped for... (Soldier's prayer)

What is the one thing you want Jesus to do for you, the one thing you hope for but have always been too timid to ask of him? Your answer may be what will help you see again as you wait for Jesus to act. If you never ask, you may never receive. The question of Jesus is not only about us, probing our hearts and motivations; it also says something about God in Jesus Christ.

"What do you want me to do for you?" It suggests that God wants to do something for you. Our misguided answers or unclear motivations don't stop Jesus from asking his heartfelt, personal question.

He asks even if we answer in a distorted, unsure manner. He asks because of his love. He asks because he cares. He asks because he wants to meet our needs, not that it is only about us in the Christian life. But today is your opportunity to answer his question, "What do you want me to do for you?"

The good news is that Christ's faithfulness and activity is not dependent upon our faithfulness nor negated by our faithlessness. His faithfulness is predicted on the promises of God to be for us and with us till the end of the age. That question from Jesus says something about God. It should tell each one of us something about the way that God desires to work on our behalf for our good and how God is willing to listen to our answers.

How God is able to act, to do for us. How God serves the world through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. How Jesus is dying to love us as a servant king, a servant leader, revealing how his power is to empower and serve others through his cruciform heart. As Jane Austen wrote, "There is no charm equal to tenderness of heart." This is so true for Jesus. He's so tender that his flesh is torn from his body for us. We may not have the answers we should, but Jesus still raises the question and his glory shines through it, as he's willing to serve and die for us. Jesus shows us how to find our lives by losing them for the sake of the people God loves so much.

“What do you want me to do for you?” This is also a question we should be asking one another because if we can help somebody to any degree as we pass along, if we can cheer anybody to any degree, then our living will not be in vain. As the poet also said one day:

**If I can do my duty, as a Christian ought;
If I can bring salvation to a world once wrought,
If I can spread the message as the Master taught,
Then my living will not be in vain.**

This may well be the question that each one of us could empowered by God’s grace to answer today, as we seek to love him and serve him above all others with our lives. Today, Jesus is asking you and me too: **“What do you want me to do for you?”**

“Lord, let us see again. Teacher give us the recovery of our sight!” Amen