

Sunday, October 20, 2024
22nd Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 24B)

Mark 10.35-45

The Rev. Michael K. Fincher

Service Live Streamed at:

<https://www.facebook.com/stgregoryslongbeach/videos/1076336320779312>

(Sermon begins at about 22:15)

“Do For Us Whatever We Ask”

Okay, when a conversation begins with “I want you to do whatever I ask,” you can be pretty certain it is going to be something you don’t want to do. Or that, in reality, you are not able to do. Personally, I’m always extremely cautious when someone starts with something along the lines of “will you do me a favor?” Striving to be a man of my word, I don’t want to commit to anything without knowing what I’m getting into. I don’t want to commit to something that I feel uncomfortable with or am not capable of doing. So, I immediately go into defensive mode with my standard response being “that depends.” I try to be open and will, if possible, see what I can do to accommodate the request. But I’ll tell you right now, I draw the line at helping people get rid of bodies.

You kinda get a similar sense from Jesus in today’s Gospel. Not the part about getting rid of bodies. But about the caution, even apprehension, at being blindsided with “Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you.”

So what prompted James and John to make the request they did? Perhaps it helps to take a step back and look at what happened immediately before they make their request. Jesus and the disciples are making their way to Jerusalem, where Jesus will meet his destiny. In fact, they are mere days from the gates of Jerusalem and the events that we have come to know as Palm Sunday. In the lead-up to today’s Gospel reading, Jesus foretells his death and resurrection for the third time: “See, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be handed over to the chief priests and the scribes, and they will condemn him to death; then they will hand him over to the Gentiles; they will mock him, and spit upon him, and flog him, and kill him; and after three days he will rise again” (Mk 10.33-34).

We don’t know why James and John choose this moment to make their request. Although Jesus having now foretold his death and resurrection three times, perhaps the disciples are finally starting to believe that it will indeed happen. The disciples did not seem to get it the first two times. But now, things are getting real. And knowing that they are close to Jerusalem, perhaps James and John figure time is short. It is now or never: “Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you.”

Although, in the asking, we might question whether even this time around the disciples, or at least James and John, truly understand what is about to happen to Jesus. If they really understood, would they have made the same request? Essentially asking to share in Jesus’ fate. Which is pretty much where Jesus goes in his response: “You do not know what you are asking.

Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?"

All cocky, James and John are certain they can handle whatever they must face so as to the have the honor of sitting at Jesus' right and his left in glory. Not even realizing that Jesus' talk about "the cup that I drink" and "the baptism that I am baptized with" are metaphors for his suffering and death. The cup reminding us of the cup of wine at Eucharist, becoming Jesus' blood shed for us. Baptism becoming the sacramental means of dying to self, putting one's old life behind, and rising to new life in Christ. These symbols are completely lost on them. Despite the bravado of their words, when the rubber meets the road they are not able to follow through. In less than a week, when the temple soldiers show up at the Garden of Gethsemane to arrest Jesus, James and John will run away along with the other disciples.

James and John are, as my mother would say, "just a little too big for their britches." They think they are more important than they really are. And they ultimately are not able to do what might be needed to have their request fulfilled—the decision ultimately being God's notwithstanding. Although, as an interesting aside, Matthew's account of this same scene has the mother of James and John asking that Jesus grant her sons seats of honor in heaven. Perhaps lessening the sting of the ultimate reality?

Nonetheless, "when the ten heard this, they began to be angry with James and John." Indignant that they should have made such a request in the first place? Or perhaps a little peeved that James and John had the nerve to ask what each of the others secretly wanted for themselves. The latter seems to be more likely, given Jesus' follow-up:

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. 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. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.

Jesus is contrasting God's ways with the ways of contemporary society. And things have not changed much in 2,000 years. Then and now, the typical approach in the world is for people to seek status and greatness, just as James and John were seeking. Noting that invariably status and greatness, no matter how innocently they might be sought at first, have a tendency to take on a life of their own. Have a tendency to lead to further pursuit of one's self-interests. What is the saying? "Power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely." Maybe a bit of an overstatement for what Jesus is saying, but the basic sentiment holds when it comes to conventional notions of power, prestige, and greatness. The root being self-centeredness and the unfettered pursuit of one's self-interests. Jesus is calling out the disciples' on their captivity to self-centeredness. Their captivity to subscribing to secular society's notions of greatness for greatness' sake, and all that accrues with it.

"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." Those who follow Jesus are called to reorient their priorities away from self to focus on other—namely God and

neighbor. To reorient their priorities away from seeking to be served to focus on serving. Jesus' whole life and ministry has been about service. His teachings have been about the need to reorient our own way of living to being one focused on service.

Service was not just something Jesus talked about in the context of his ministry. He even related his impending death and resurrection to the theme of service. That his death and resurrection would be the ultimate example of service. Each of the three times he foretells his death and resurrection, Jesus explains to the disciples that this will be his ultimate lesson in service. All about modeling a shift in focus, a shift in priorities. In the first foretelling, he tells the disciples "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it" (Mk 8.34-35). In the second foretelling, he tells them, "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all" (Mk 9.35). And then, in this third foretelling, "Whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be a slave of all."

All pointed messages to his followers of the need to shift focus. Of the need to not seek greatness but to seek humility. Of the need to not seek to receive riches but to give of one's own riches. Of the need to not seek to be served but to serve. But let's not walk away with the impression that Jesus is wagging his finger at the disciples—and us. Yes, he is pointing out the need to reframe our perspective, to refocus and to change our approach to life, to follow his model. But he is not saying "you need to get your act together and only then come and follow me." He recognizes that we need help. And he offers that help in the form of his teachings, in the form of his example, and in the form of his own death and resurrection.

As Jesus says in the last verse of today's reading, "For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many." "To give his life a ransom for many." This is huge! A ransom is payment to liberate a captive. In using the analogy of paying a ransom, he is recognizing that our current way of life, any delusions of grandeur, any buying into society's notions of power, prestige, and greatness, are a form of captivity that have been imposed on us by our secular society. Ideals and expectations that are ingrained in us from birth. Leading to a tendency toward self-centered patterns of thought and behavior. We are captive to our own self-centeredness and all that flow from it. Sure, we can work on changing that, and many do. But it is hard work and can take a lot of struggling; a lot of two steps forward and one step back.

We do have our own part to play in reprioritizing, in refocusing, our thoughts and our behavior. But Jesus is offering to help. To be a ransom to help break the bonds of captivity. This liberation actually has a double meaning. As Christians, we recognize that through his death and resurrection, Christ liberates us from our captivity to sin and death. His death and resurrection break the bonds that sin and death have on us, providing us with forgiveness and new and eternal life in him. But the additional benefit of this ransom, of this liberation, is that we are provided with a new way of viewing reality. Recognizing that the ways of the world are built on an illusion of freedom and greatness at the expense of others. An illusion that is a form of captivity as opposed to liberation. And that liberation is found not in seeking to be served, but to serve others.

Our stewardship theme for this year is “Walk in Love,” based on the passage of scripture that we use as an offertory sentence every Sunday: “Walk in love, as Christ loves us and gives himself for us, an offering and sacrifice to God” (Eph 5.2, modified). The words we use to prepare for Eucharist. The words we use to prepare to present our offering to God—an offering of our financial gifts, but also an offering of ourselves to be of service to God and his kingdom. To “Walk in Love” is at once both an invitation and a commitment. That we are both invited and in response, we commit ourselves, to “Walk in Love” through service to God and service to others in its many forms. For in God’s kingdom, in the Divine economy, it is in serving God and one another that we truly experience freedom and greatness. And the means by which Jesus is able to fully respond to our requests for him to do what we ask.