



SUNDAY SERMON

Getting What God Wants

DATE
Pentecost 22
Sunday, Oct. 21, 2018

PREACHER
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Mark 10:35-45

A woman who lived alone in a trailer in poverty and rode the bus to spend her days cleaning other people's houses and raising other people's children, dies – and in her will leaves the million and a half dollars that she had squirreled away – to a local school for troubled children. A young, freshly-minted, law school graduate turns down the offer from a prestigious firm and returns to the inner-city barrio where he grew up, and where his grandmother still lives, there to create a new kind of school. And a successful executive, well-positioned for the next corporate take-over, decides at age 47, to change careers, and work instead for a local not-for-profit earning a mere fraction of her former salary.

We know these stories. We know these people. How do we measure success? Where are we trying to get to? What are we seeking to achieve? Said Jesus, "I have come that you may have life, and have it in abundance." Yes. But what does that mean, or look like? "Abundance" defined how?

James and John, sons of Zebedee, reveal one mistaken perspective: that abundant life in Christ shall bring benefits of prestige, recognition, power. "Grant us to sit, one at your left and one at your right," they ask. The other disciples' indignation with James and John's pushy-ness, reveals – I think – that they share their colleague's view; they're just annoyed they didn't think to ask first. They're not alone thinking that life with Jesus has its benefits – a way to the Kingdom.

This exchange takes place on the road to Jerusalem, mere days before Jesus' final confrontation with the powers of the Temple and of Rome. So one may forgive their presuming that Jesus' victory will be one of worldly and political domination – in which case, any one close to him would be a fool not to ask for a cabinet position.

But this also takes place moments after Jesus has told them – not once or twice, but three times – that in Jerusalem he will be tried and put to death, that his victory is one of self-sacrifice. As followers of Jesus then and now, we don't seem to get that, or retain that for any length of time. To share in Jesus' baptism and to drink the cup that Jesus drinks is to pursue a path of victory that is defined not as worldly success but as sacrifice for others.

I am aware of living between two polarities: I am propelled by my need to get, and I am propelled by my need to give. I do not think the one is bad and the other good, but each awakens a different sensitivity within me.

I am not talking simply about needing stuff; I am talking about acquiring and achieving. Like you, I've put a lot of energy into getting where I am today. I work hard. I've done a lot of acquiring – of education, experience, expertise. And all of this gets me an important sense of security, defines me, gives me a sense of self-worth. If I'm honest... I apply some of this same energy in my life with Christ. If I shape my life in certain ways and I pray, read scripture, serve others, and so forth, there's a sense of reward and fulfillment.

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Yet I also feel a strong pull in the opposite direction; a need to give. Not to acquire but to relinquish, not to achieve but to receive, not to accomplish but to accept, not to prevail but to serve and submit. I think when I'm focused on getting, then I'm focused on me, and relying on my own agency. When I focus on giving – and releasing and accepting, I'm focused – not on me – but on the world about me, and on you; not on my needs, but on the needs of others. I become attentive to what you bring, to what God may offer, what the world – in all its beauty and its cruelty, has to offer. When I can ease the grip of my ego's ambition, I may not gain security, but I am better able to receive some peace and gratitude.

Not that you asked, but I find it tricky leading a church – because I believe you also have these desires – to achieve - and to receive – in your walk with Christ. Which desire shall I feed?

As the church, we seek to offer ways that you may draw nearer to God. "Come; follow me." "Here," we say; "take this bread, this truth, this Way of salvation. Try it. It is good." I am glad when someone says, I am being fed here; I am finding what I need for me, for my kin. As I am grieved when someone says, I did not find what I needed; I'm going elsewhere. All of us who exercise leadership in this church pay attention to how it is we are or are not providing a path for, and meeting the needs of fellow sojourners.

But it is problematic if this entire dynamic of relationship, this economy of the church, is based upon meeting your needs, my needs – as if the reward is that we will get to sit, one at Jesus' right and one at his left, on that heavenly throne.

Maybe I've been doing some false advertising. Jesus promises his disciples not that they shall be in glory with him, rewarded and happy. He promises that if they will follow him they shall share with him in his sufferings and challenges. Says Bishop Will Willimon, "This is the message that followers of Jesus have been reluctant to proclaim to the world, perhaps because we're reluctant to hear this message ourselves! Jesus is not a technique for getting what we want out of God; Jesus is God's way of getting what God wants out of us. *Jesus is not a technique for getting what we want out of God; Jesus is God's way of getting what God wants out of us.* God wants a world, a world redeemed, restored to God. And the way God gets that world is with ordinary people like us who are willing to walk like Jesus, talk like Jesus, yes, and even if need be to suffer like Jesus." "Come, take up your cross and follow me."

The question is not: will what we do today be pleasing to Christ? To get in God's good graces?

The question is: how are we participating in God's agenda? How do we share in God's promise to bring about the Kingdom on earth as it is in heaven?

Today we join with people of many faiths to celebrate children's Sabbath, established by the Children's Defense Fund as a time to lift up the needs and pray for children. To get a sense of how we might share in creating God's Kingdom, let's consider the world our children need – a world in which children are not separated from their families, or subject to abuse, or impoverished; a world in which they know themselves to be loved and cherished, protected, nourished, educated. As we create the world our children need and long for, we will create the Kingdom that God promises.

Even if today we embrace this path and submit ourselves to Christ, that choice is not made once for all. It is made daily, in ways large and mostly small. It is made first through the intention of our heart, expressed in prayer each day: here am I, Lord; take me, use me, as you will; show me your way. It is made in decisions about time, resources, money. We need not worry now about being faithful for a lifetime. The question is will we be faithful today, with the people around us today, with our choices today. Jesus himself, his disciples, and every saint since, has waffled and wavered some of the time.

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I read of a well-dressed European woman traveling on safari in Tanzania. The group stopped briefly at a hospital for lepers. The heat was intense, the flies buzzing. She noticed a nurse bending down in the dirt, tending to the terrible sores of a child with leprosy. With disdain the woman remarked, "Why, I wouldn't do that for all the money in the world!" The nurse quietly replied, "Neither would I."

For many years I kept a little card in a frame on my desk. It said: "If not us, who? If not today, when? If not for the Kingdom of God, why?" Go. Be the church.