



What Do You Want?

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Vienna Presbyterian Church
Mark 10:35-45

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What do you want? As human beings, we want things that are common to all of us. We also want things that reflect our unique, God-given personhood.

What do you want? An end to this pandemic? An indoor meal at a favorite restaurant? School and extra-curricular activities as we used to know them? Being able to once again safely hug? Healing for yourself or a loved one? A restored relationship? Less anxiety and depression? Financial stability? Satisfying work? More passion for injustice and prejudice? A deeper relationship with God? What do you want?

One more question. If you knew you had just days to live, how would your answer change?

This is precisely where we find Jesus in this morning's passage.

He is on his way to Jerusalem, the place of his betrayal, arrest, mock trial, and crucifixion.

Three times in Mark's gospel, in rapid succession, Jesus has tried to tell his disciples that he will be a **suffering Messiah**. But they don't get it.

What they *think* they want, and what *Jesus* wants for them, could hardly be more different.

Our passage in Mark 10 has two scenes. In the first, James and John, the sons of Zebedee, also known as the Sons of Thunder, stealthily get Jesus alone to themselves. They are scheming. Lobbying? A Coup? Jockeying within the Cabinet? These two sons of Zebedee are already solidly ensconced in Jesus' inner circle of three: Peter, James, and John. But they want something more.

Verse 35 "Teacher, we have something we want you to do for us."

Verse 36 "What is it? I'll see what I can do."

Verse 37 "Arrange it so that we will be awarded the highest places of honor in your glory – one of us at your right, the other at your left" (The Message).

We know that "two robbers will in fact occupy those places and it will not be in glory" (Mark: Interpretation, Lamar Williamson, Jr., p. 192).

Jesus' reply is astonishing! He could severely rebuke these upstarts as he has recently done with Peter. Instead, he explains why their request is impossible. James and John are blatantly ambitious. They are metaphorically both blind and deaf. Their self-knowledge is slim. They think they **can** share Jesus' cup and baptism of suffering. Jesus tells them, "You cannot." Only One, the Son of Man, the Son of God, can pay the ransom set in motion in the garden of Eden.

In fact, these brothers will each meet their own destiny, their own cups of suffering. James will die by sword through order of King Herod (Acts 12:1-2). John will be exiled to the island of Patmos (Revelation 1:9).

Second scene: The other ten disciples, of course, hear about all of this. “Rumor has it!” They are indignant. Angry. How dare James and John! Perhaps the umbrage of the ten masks their own secret ambitions.

Jesus calls all of them together. The Greek means that he summons them. When conflict, angling for position, and secrecy threaten to unravel community, God’s best way is to come together in truth.

I am in awe of Jesus. He knows his own death is imminent. Within days he will hang on a Roman cross. And yet, instead of chastising any of his chosen band, he responds with patience. His tone is “gentle.” He chooses to “teach and not censure” (Matthew, A Commentary, Dale F. Bruner, p. 332).

Jesus uses Hebrew parallelism, like we find all over the psalms. “Friends, if you really want to be great, be a servant. If you really want to be first, you must be the slave of all.”

“Because I, the Son of Man, did not come to earth to **be** served, but **to** serve. I left heaven to give my life to ransom yours...to buy you back...to release you from captivity...I will exchange my life for yours.”

You probably heard this week that parchments containing fragments from the biblical books of Zechariah and Nahum have been found in Israel! There hasn’t been such a find in 60 years!

Through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, God has given us 66 books of the Bible. But only John’s gospel tells us what Jesus did right in the middle of his last meal on earth. He took the position of the lowest household slave. Jesus wrapped a towel around his own waist, and washed the filthy feet of each of his disciples. **Don’t let the familiarity of this story dull you.**

“So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also are to wash one another’s feet. For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you” (John 13:14-15).

We really need to get this. Jesus is now *just hours* from his death. And *this* is what matters most to him. Servanthood. Not crowds on a mountainside. Not throngs pressing in on him by the sea. Not multitudes waiting to be fed with fish and bread...but instruction about servanthood for the very ones whom he would commission (Acts 1:8) to spread the Gospel.

Why can we be resistant to serving? Here’s a partial list: our selfishness, our laziness, our inflated view of our importance, our insecurity that drives us to try to get ahead, our vacillating—even as Christians—about the real source of our worth and identity, our envy, our pride. It’s easier to be appalled by James’ and John’s brash boldness than to admit that we, as well, are lured by power, status, and prestige. “We have met the enemy and they are us” (Walt Kelly’s re-phrasing of Oliver Hazard Perry).

Biblical scholar Dale Bruner writes that ambition is not all bad, therefore, it is difficult to tame. He frames the quandary as a question: “When are desires to do well legitimate desires for the glory of God and the service of others, and when are desires to do well illegitimate and for one’s own glory?” Bruner concludes, “Disciples never know exactly” (p. 326).

So if he’s right, then we *have* to start with a posture of humility. There are four steps.

The first is a deliberate examination of our motives. Whose glory and honor are we really seeking? Our own? Another’s? God’s? This kind of examining won’t happen if we’re not intentional. So we need to set aside regular time to “let our lives speak” (Parker Palmer). And then, we need to be still and quiet long enough to listen.

The second step is confession. What does our examination show us is true about us? What do we need to confess? This Lent I’ve been using the same devotional I used last year. Every day there’s an opportunity to answer thoughtful questions based on the day’s Scripture. I do see growth from last year’s entries. I also see that God and I are continuing to work on sin patterns that have beset me most of my life.

The third step is to turn our eyes upon Jesus.

Philippians 2 contains one of the oldest songs that the first Christians ever sang. Listen to the verses that immediately precede the hymn: “Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus...”

And then, the hymn. It’s all about Jesus’ incarnation, his descent.

“...[T]hough he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death – even death on a cross” (Philippians 2:3-8).

The fourth and final step: Serve. There is not a person hearing this message who cannot serve in some way.

A biblical scholar who used to teach in our own state of Virginia, at one of our denomination’s seminaries, writes this about serving:

True discipleship is characterized by a costly pouring out of one’s life for another, whether it be an aging parent, a difficult spouse, a special [needs] child, another member of the Christian fellowship who has unusual needs, or any person whose situation elicits service at personal cost. Jesus came to serve and to give his life (Williamson, p. 195).

Serve because you love Jesus. Serve because the Holy Spirit can equip you. Serve so that people can’t help but ask: “What *is it* about these people who love Jesus?”