

WHAT DO YOU WANT JESUS TO DO FOR YOU?

Sermon, October 28, 2018

Reformation Sunday

Text: Mark 10:35-52

Twice in our text today Jesus asked, "What do you want me to do for you?" He received two very different answers.

You may have noticed that elections are coming up. At election time, it used to be fairly common to read or hear political candidates invoking religion, and to read or hear religious leaders invoking politics (*I try not to do that here; I've long held that partisan politicizing from the pulpit is a prostitution of the pastoral privilege of standing and speaking from here; the pulpit is for the Word of God and the principles therein to be proclaimed and explained, with one goal being fostering the development of personal character virtues of faithfulness, decency, honesty, integrity, goodness and sincere repentance among the hearers, and then the hearers are encouraged to go from here and carry out your responsibilities as God-fearing, decent, honest, good and responsible people of integrity outside these walls, which includes the responsibilities of citizenship and the ballot box ... but I digress a bit*). When on a campaign or a crusade to gain power or control, the conventional wisdom used to be that it would help to invoke religion, not ridicule it. Religion and jockeying for power have long been mixed together. It's only been relatively recently in my lifetime that religion has been seen by some in the political world as a liability or as evidence of bigotry or misogyny, but again, I digress.

In our Gospel reading, Jesus has just announced His decision to go to Jerusalem, the city of power. James and John seem to have considered this as something of a campaign to assume power, and they became excited about the possibilities of it. So they said, "Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask." Jesus looks and asks, "What do you want me to do for you?" James and John replied, "Let us sit on your right and left hand, in Your glory." In other words, "When you take power, give us seats of power, too." Jesus replied, "You really don't know what you are asking. Can you drink the cup I drink, or be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized?"¹ Suffice it to say for now, they understood this imagery, this euphemism. They knew this was Jesus' way of asking, "Can you endure everything that I am going to endure?"

The boys answered, with all the youthful, energetic and slightly naïve, brash optimism of their younger years, "Yes We Can!" (*We know from other sources that James and John were the youngsters among the disciples, John the youngest of them all; some scholars speculate he may have been only sixteen or seventeen at the time.*) After a pause, Jesus replies, and I'm sure with a note of sad affection and a prophet's eye to the future, "Yes, you will indeed drink from my cup." You may remember this has a bit of a double meaning; we looked at this story from Matthew's perspective during Holy Week as this took place just prior to Palm Sunday.² I pointed out that we know from the vantage point of history they would indeed suffer ... James was, in fact, the first of the disciples to die; he was executed as recorded in Acts 12 by command of Herod Agrippa. John, too, would also go on to face much suffering, persecution and torture; he would also live to endure seeing all his fellow apostles die horrible martyrs' deaths. He was the only apostle to die a natural death; tradition has it he lived well into his nineties, living his final years in exile on Patmos. Jesus continued, "You will indeed drink my cup, but to sit at my right hand and my left is not for me to grant. Those places belong to those for whom they have been prepared."

We are told that when the other ten disciples heard about this request, they weren't happy. They were understandably indignant. Everyone is on edge anyway, because Jerusalem was not a safe place for them to go, and injected into this tense atmosphere is this irritant of ambitious political maneuvering by these two brash young brothers. Yes, even disciples of Jesus can be political, jockeying for power and privilege and special treatment. Jesus goes on to say, "You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. **Not so with you!** Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many."

When they got to Jericho, a town about eighteen miles east of Jerusalem, a great crowd began to follow Jesus. Maybe they are all eager to join the campaign trail of this new candidate they assumed was about to take power; maybe they were eager to Make Israel Great Again and boot out the occupying Roman power. But Jesus has His own mission. He is heading to Jerusalem to fulfill His mission as the suffering servant, in order to do what it takes to procure God's forgiving mercy for His people. As Jesus and the large crowd were leaving Jericho preparing to make their way to Jerusalem, suddenly, a blind beggar named Bartimaeus cried out, "Jesus, son of David, have mercy on me." The people around him say, "Be quiet. Don't stop Jesus now; He's on his way to something important. Don't bother the Master." But the unimportant-to-the-crowd blind beggar just kept crying out, "Jesus, son of David, have mercy on me."

¹ As pointed out (only half-jokingly) on Sunday, there is a theological problem with how the NIV has translated this text. It is a crucial tenet of our faith that Jesus was without sin. However, the NIV (and, surprisingly, KJV) translators have Jesus committing the sin of ending a sentence with a preposition! They have Jesus saying, "... or be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with?" Argh! I much prefer the RSV (or the ESV) versions I quoted above.

² See <https://greenwoodchurch.files.wordpress.com/2018/03/great-expectations-palm-sunday.pdf>

He was called Bartimaeus, which might have been a pejorative nickname (*lending weight to this is that Mark includes both the original Aramaic and Greek side by side; for some reason, Mark is underscoring SOMETHING about this name*). We know the prefix B-A-R means “son,” but the name Timaeus might not be a proper name; it’s possibly derived from a Hebrew word that means “unclean” or “impure.” Bar-Timaeus *may* mean “*Son of Iniquity*” or “*Son of Impurity*” or “*Child of Uncleaness*” (if Charles Schulz was translating, maybe he would write, “*Son of Pig Pen*”).³ It is quite possible he may have been the son of someone disreputable; a son of a prostitute, a son of a criminal or some other outcast. So, he’s blind; strike one. He’s a beggar; strike two. He is known by a pejorative nickname; strike three ... but don’t count this persistent man out!

This blind man turned a blind eye to his perceived obstacles and a deaf ear to the crowd trying to get him to be quiet, and continued to shout out, “*Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!*” It is interesting that this is the first time in Mark’s gospel Jesus is called Son of David, which is a Messianic title. This could be something of a literary flourish by Mark to point out that, up to now, out of all the crowds of people around Jesus, it was only this blind man who could really “see” exactly Who Jesus was (*Peter had called Him the Christ in chapter 9, but was part of the “inner circle” of the disciples, not exactly part of the larger crowd*). Here we are 2/3rd of the way through Mark’s Gospel, and finally someone calls Jesus by His proper title! “*Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me.*” The next two words are huge; in fact, I almost used these two words for the sermon title: “JESUS STOPPED.” Jesus, God in the flesh, **stops** the parade to Jerusalem because at last He hears the words of someone who (a) recognizes Jesus for who He is and (b) doesn’t want to use Jesus for power or control; he simply wants mercy; he wants a merciful Savior. A cry for mercy ... that’s a plea that will make Jesus stop and take notice. Jesus is never too busy to listen to you, especially if you are asking not for power or control, but for mercy.

I think a story from my 35th high school class reunion illustrates this beautifully. At the reunion I saw one fellow sitting at a table who looked like classmate Gary Epp (*Gary had moved to Hollywood to work in the acting profession ... if you ever saw the Symbicort commercial with the COPD-afflicted grandpa reading, “And he huffed and he puffed ...” and the little grandson says, “Like you do sometimes, Grandpa?” Well, in 2017, Grandpa was my classmate Gary ... they have a new bald guy doing it now, but it was Gary in 2017 saying “Watch out, piggies!”*)⁴ He was with a small, frail woman in a wheelchair ... I assumed it might be a daughter or perhaps a sibling. Eventually I made my way over. “*Gary?*” “*No, I’m David. I’m Frances’ husband.*” Well, Frances was my classmate; I didn’t know her well in high school, but I did remember her ... and she was the frail, uncommunicative woman in the wheelchair. I learned that 26 years earlier she suffered a massive stroke during childbirth and it left her nearly paralyzed. Her baby daughter survived, and was now a mother herself. Well, the story was just beginning. I sat in awe as David told me some of the story; I was able to later fit in other pieces from friends who knew them well.

I might have some of the details wrong, and I’m putting this together largely from memory and about a dozen conversations, but the gist of the story is that Frances went to a small private Christian college not far from our home town. There she met David, who had the somewhat-unfair advantage of being the son of the college president ... you might say David was a Big Man on Campus, because he was the president’s son AND because he was one of the ONLY men on this mostly-female campus. They married soon after graduation; a few years later, their marriage was suffering some trouble; and they separated. David prayed things would change, he prayed she would change, he prayed that Jesus would give him back his marriage, he prayed that Jesus would give him the power to “fix” things, but soon he had no choice but to let go. Frances had become involved with another man, and she soon filed for divorce from David. Before long, she was expecting a child. And tragedy struck during childbirth; her (*so-called*) lover couldn’t handle it all and he left her. Now again, I don’t know all the details, but I’m told she just hit bottom. At 27 years old, she was helpless, incapacitated, overwhelmed, and on top of it all I’m sure she felt a sense of bitter regret and maybe shame. She literally could do nothing to help herself. She cried out for mercy. And Jesus offered her mercy ... in David, who had never stopped loving her. They remarried a year or so later, and David became her servant husband. For 25 years he had been feeding her, dressing her, cleaning her, taking courses in nursing and physical therapy to learn how to better care for her ... all the while raising her daughter to adulthood, so that Frances can now enjoy the privilege of being a grandmother. And he brought her to her 35th class reunion. I was in the presence of an angel.

“*Jesus, son of David, have mercy on me.*” And Jesus stopped. He looked at the blind man ... and more than likely, He first looked over at James and John, with a bit of a twinkle in His eye ... and He asked Bartimaeus the same question he had asked James and John earlier: “*What do you want me to do for you?*” Bartimaeus responded to Jesus not by asking for power, but for mercy. He said, “*Rabbi, I just want to see.*” Jesus responded by saying, “*Go, your faith has healed you.*” We’re told that Bartimaeus immediately received his sight *and followed Jesus along the road*.

There’s so much that could be said, but I’ll just close with this: That is what faith is ... a decision to follow the Savior “along the road”, along the way, wherever it leads, exercising and using the mercy He has given us. Much of the time we will not know where this road is leading, anymore than did Bartimaeus, anymore than did my classmate and her husband, anymore than did James and John. That’s the way mercy works. Now we are following Jesus through His mission for our lives. We are using the mercy He gave us in service to Him. Where it all leads doesn’t really matter. At root, faith is simply a way of seeing and following and emulating a Savior who came not be served, but to serve ... and to give His life as a ransom for many, all for the saving and sanctifying purposes of God.

³ See <https://biblehub.com/greek/924.htm>

⁴ See Gary at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e-cZFMfm0w>