

WHAT DO YOU WANT JESUS TO DO FOR YOU?

Sermon, October 17, 2021

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.

In preparation for our table discussions at the Wednesday night Fellowship Dinner (*before plans were changed, we were initially going to discuss how we've been personally affected and/or otherwise affected/blessed/guided/protected by God throughout the past 21 months or so of pandemic restriction*), I came across a parody of Paul Simon's 1975 hit, "Fifty Ways to Leave Your Lover." It was entitled "Fifty Ways to Beat this Virus" (*now if you don't know the original song, this won't be as funny, but bear with me ... many here do know it*). Some selections: "Don't hop on the bus, Gus. Keep washing your hands, Stan. Wipe down every toy, Roy. To stay virus free. Don't hoard the TP, Lee, sneeze into your sleeve, Steve. Stop touching your face, Grace; Heed the CDC. Keep back six feet, Pete; just use the Purell, Mel, stay home if you're sick, Rick, stay away from the pack, Jack, and keep yourself free." An entirely new vocabulary of words and phrases became a constituent part of our everyday conversation in the past 21 months (*as well as part of our politics*). Oh, most were words we used all along before, but now in a wholly new way ... phrases/words like "Shelter in place." "Flatten the curve." "Superspreader" (*and we're not talking about farm equipment*). "Cluster." "Droplets." "Social distancing." "Covid" (*which is an abbreviation of COronaVirusDisease, which is a name that's been around since at least 1935 to describe an illness caused by a certain virus class or type ... including the common cold, several flu viruses, and so on. If you ever had a cold, you've had Covid. This current "Covid" is Covid 19, as it was produced in 2019*). "Pandemic." "Quarantine." "Breakthrough cases." "Have you been tested?" "Where's your mask?" "PPE."

And one more: "Follow the science."

Regarding that last one, I want to say this clearly, yet carefully, as not to be unnecessarily provocative: We are, and ever have been, called to follow the Truth. True science is, to be sure, a pursuit of truth; but in itself it is not Truth ... suffice it to say for now, lots of scientists and medical professionals disagree with each other's science on a whole range of matters. That's about as far as I'll go into this right now, except to add that like the blind man in today's Gospel reading, we are to call out to Jesus for mercy, and ask Him to help us to see ... to see what is true, to see what is right, to see what is good ... and then follow the Truth "along the road" of our lives. Don't necessarily follow the science, unless, of course, the science has been clearly shown to be fully in accord with the truth. And, for what it's worth, don't necessarily follow the politics. Follow the truth. Michael Straczynski paraphrased a Mark Twain quote (*which I'll reference and include in the footnote below*)¹ to put on the lips of comic book hero Captain America in a dialogue with Spiderman (*pardon the corny comic book reference, but the paraphrase of the quote succinctly summarizes the gist of Twain's intention*) –

"Doesn't matter what the press says. Doesn't matter what the politicians or the mobs say. Doesn't matter if the whole country decides that something wrong is something right. This nation was founded on one principle above all else. The requirement that we stand up for what we believe, no matter the odds or consequences. When the mob and the press and the whole world tell you to move, your job is to plant yourself like a tree beside the river of truth, and tell the whole world, 'No. You move.'"

It used to be fairly common to read or hear political candidates invoking religion, and to read or hear religious leaders invoking politics, especially in election years. 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, evidence of bigotry or misogyny, but I digress. Also as a bit of an aside: I've long held that partisan politicizing from the pulpit is a "PPP" (*not a PPE*) ... a perversion of the pastoral privilege; the pulpit is for the Word of God and the principles therein to be proclaimed and explained from here: principles and virtues like faithfulness, decency, honesty, integrity, goodness, sincere repentance, and then we go from here to carry out our 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.

The context for our Gospel reading is that Jesus has just announced His decision to go to Jerusalem, the city of power. Some think 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 right up there with You." Jesus replied, "You really don't know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup I drink, or be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized?" Now, they understood this imagery, these euphemisms. "The cup of suffering, the baptism of fire" ... they understood this was Jesus' way of asking, "Do you think you are you able to endure everything that I am going to have to endure?"

¹ From <https://www.quora.com/Who-was-the-writer-that-wrote-the-famous-Captain-America-no-you-move-quote?share=1> "Each of you, for himself or herself, by himself or herself, and on his or her own responsibility, must speak. It is a solemn and weighty responsibility and not lightly to be flung aside at the bullying of pulpit, press, government or politician. Each must decide for himself or herself alone what is right and what is wrong, which course is patriotic and which isn't. You cannot shirk this and be a man, to decide it against your convictions is to be an unqualified and inexcusable traitor. It is traitorous both against yourself and your country. Let men label you as they may, if you alone of all the nation decide one way, and that way be the right way by your convictions of the right, you have done your duty by yourself and by your country, hold up your head for you have nothing to be ashamed of."

The boys answered, with all the youthful, energetic and slightly naïve, brash optimism of their younger years, "Lord, We are able!" (or to use language from another political campaign, "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." We looked at this story from Matthew's perspective last May² and also during past Holy Weeks: this took place the eve of Palm Sunday. 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; as recorded in Acts 12, he was executed by command of Herod Agrippa. John, too, would also go on to face much persecution and brutal torture; he would also live to see all his fellow apostles die horrible martyrs' deaths. He was the only one 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 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 maneuvering by these two brash young brothers. Yes, even disciples of Jesus can be political, squabbling for status or rank, jockeying for 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, a servant, 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, 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 as we know know, 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!." But the unimportant-to-the-crowd blind beggar just kept crying out, "Jesus, son of David, have mercy on me."

Two things are significant here: (1) We are given this beggar's name; nowhere else in the Gospels are any of the recipients of Jesus' healing miracles named. And to make sure we noticed it, Mark states the name twice. He was called Bartimaeus, which means (Mark explains) Son of Timaeus. Some scholars think this might have been a pejorative nickname.. 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"). 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!"

Second significant thing to note here: This is the first time in Mark's gospel Jesus is called Son of David, which is clearly 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. 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: "JESUS STOPPED." Other translations have, "Jesus stood still." Jesus **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. That's a plea that will make Jesus stop and take notice. Jesus is never too busy to listen, especially if you are asking not for power or privilege, but for mercy.

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 or privilege, 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 more 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. To follow Jesus along the road, no matter what. To follow this one who IS the Truth, and the Way and the Life, wherever He may lead, and using the mercy He gave us in service to Him. To live our lives according to the Truth, determined to follow the Truth and to model truthfulness. At root, faith is not about power or control, it is simply a way of truly seeing and following and emulating a Savior who came not be served, but to serve and to give His life for many ... all for the saving and sanctifying purposes of God.

² See <https://greenwoodchurch.files.wordpress.com/2021/05/love-and-thunder-1.pdf>