

Getting What God Wants

A Sermon preached by the Rev. Ledlie I. Laughlin

October 17, 2021 ~ Mark 10:35-45

A woman who lived alone in rural poverty and rode the bus each day to teach in the local elementary school, dies – and in her will leaves hundreds of thousands of dollars that she had squirreled away – to a 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? What are we willing – or needing – to relinquish? 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, if understandable, 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 ask first. They’re not alone in imagining 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, achieving, arriving. 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 a reassuring 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.

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've noticed that when I focus on getting, then I'm focused on me; relying on my own agency. When I focus on giving – and releasing and accepting, I'm focused on the world about me, 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. Ironically, the one makes me needier, the other makes me richer.

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. As I am grieved when someone says, I am not finding what I need; 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, all 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.*

Let’s start with God: 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 beloved community – here on earth as it is in heaven?

In St. Columba’s vision to *Live God’s Love*, we articulated our intention (quote) “to practice Christianity to create a just society, seeking allies and nurturing partnerships to serve our neighborhood, our city, and the world.” (end quote). We will seek justice, together with others. Among steps to take, I am eager to see us join a faith based community organization, specifically Washington Interfaith Network – WIN – comprised of forty congregations across the city – multi-faith, multi-race of every economic circumstance. In so doing, we can help cast the vision and shape the agenda, but we won’t get to call the shots. In partnership with others, we will, at times, need to support agendas not our own. And this, dear ones, will be very good for our individual and congregational soul. This will compel us to listen deeply to those with experiences and perspectives different from our own, and will move us into places of deeper understanding, mutuality, and wholeness.

What is God inviting us to relinquish in order to become the beloved community?

What is God asking of you? It’s not a one and done question. This is hard. It is a daily practice, a daily discipline – made first through the intention of our heart, expressed in prayer each day: here am I, Lord; show me, take me, use me, as you will. 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.

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. Live **God's** Love.