

“What do you want me to do for you?”

I Kings 3:3-15

Mark 10:35-52

“And they said to him, ‘Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory,’” (10:37) “The blind man said to him, ‘My teacher, let me see again.’” (10:51b)

“What do you want me to do for you?” The question is not the question of a genie popped out of a bottle or even a doctor in a white coat. It is the question of God come close to your life and mine. “What do you want me to do for you?” It appears twice at the end of a section in Mark’s Gospel that has been ringing the changes on the cost of discipleship. Three times Jesus’ prediction of his passion and death has named the cost. Three times those closest to him have neither heard nor seen what was coming. First Peter rebukes Jesus for teaching that he would have to undergo suffering and rejection and death. Second Mark tells us that the disciples simply do not understand Jesus’ words about suffering and are afraid to ask. Now, as far as I can tell, the twelve simply ignore Jesus’ last and most detailed description of his passion in favor of telling Jesus—not asking but telling him that they want him to do whatever they ask of him.

Here is the heartening thing about Jesus’ response: he does not scold them but asks them to be specific. He takes them seriously as he does us whenever we ask, knock, seek. What do you want me to do for you? Ignoring Jesus’ heart-wrenching anticipation of being mocked and spit upon and flogged and killed, James and John simply go for the glory, asking that Jesus place them to his right and his left in the kingdom come. Since James and John had seen the light of God’s glory in the face of Jesus on the mountain, with Elijah and Moses by his side, perhaps they were thinking still about the meaning of that experience for them. What they ask Jesus to do is grant them special status when he comes into power. They are readying themselves, my colleague Stan Saunders says, not for the road Jesus and those who follow him must travel, “but for a world much like the one they already inhabit.”

Still, Jesus does not rebuke them. Rather he gently chides them because it is painfully obvious they really do not know what they are asking; do not understand as we do not (this notwithstanding) that if any are to walk where Jesus walks, they first are headed not for glory but for a bitter cup of suffering and a baptism of death. So again Jesus tells them what is ahead and now asks a very different question of them: “Are you able...?” The word does not mean capable, are you capable, but do have you the authority to seat yourselves at my right and left in glory. Blithely they answer, “We do!” In their minds, they will have the authority because Jesus will grant them the authority, just like any ruler grants positions of importance to those closest to him.

But in the realm where God rules, in the kingdom we glimpse in Jesus, the glory that is God’s to grant has something to do with losing your life to save it or denying yourself and taking up your cross and following something other than your bliss. Jesus had just said as much to the rich young man who knew and kept all ten of the commandments but was finally unable to let go of a life ordered by his tangible wants and follow the One whose life was destined by self-giving, self-emptying love.

In a way, you could say that even though the disciples had left every tangible thing behind (“Look,” said Peter a few verses before, “we have left everything and followed you!”), they had not left behind the desire to get what the world had taught them to want; and what they wanted was not so different from what the rich young man had acquired, I assume, by his hard work. They wanted glory, position, privilege, the promise that they would at least be first among equals in the kingdom. Maybe, said Jesus, but this was not for him to grant. All he could promise to those who continued to follow him was a cup of suffering and a baptism of death. All he could assure them was that they would *die to the self they were without him and be given the life they were destined to live with him*. In fact, at this turn in the Gospel of Mark toward Jerusalem, Jesus

goes forth to die our death, to accompany us into the grave so that death will no longer have the power to rule our wants and dictate our need for the security or the immunity from suffering that position and privilege and possessions still promise to give us today.

Now when Jesus tells them that he cannot give them what they want--that he can only give them suffering and death—the ten are angry at James and John. No one knows whether they were angry because the two had asked only for themselves or because the ten were embarrassed by the self-serving sound of a request they secretly wished they had made first. In any case, Jesus chooses to take their anger as a chance to say again what he had been saying all along the way. He says, in the world where death still rules, the first are first and the last are last. This is not so among you twelve and, by implication in Mark, among those gathered in Christ's church. Greatness under God's rule is a life lived for others, a life laid down for others, a life that begins in service of the other. Still, this is sugar-coating the matter. Therefore Jesus or maybe the early church adds at the end, "For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve and to give his life a ransom for many." Bonhoeffer said it even more directly: When Christ calls a man, calls a woman, he bids them come and die." He bids you leave, relinquish, die to the life you want without him and receive the completely surprising and utterly new life God has destined you to live with him.

Mostly we still go for the glory, for the security, for being happy; mostly we let the world (read: death) dictate our wants--except maybe in Lent, a season when the followers of Jesus have traditionally examined their wants and engaged in inconsequential acts of self-denial. But more and more whole congregations sleep through Maundy Thursday and skip Good Friday, only to rise on Easter morning as clueless as the disciples about the cup of suffering Jesus drained so that, going straight for the glory, we may shout "He is risen!"

Truth be told, when asked by Jesus what we want, you and I remain mostly a mess of self-referential wants, wants by which the world has taken possession of our lives and our children's lives. At their best, our most prayerful answers have something to do with being spared or relieved of the suffering and the brokenness and the fearfulness of the future that lies before us and before those we love. Be assured, Jesus will pray the same in the Garden of Gethsemane: "Abba, Father, for you all things are possible; remove this cup from me." God knows Jesus does not *want* to lose his one, precious life in the suffering and rejection of death on the cross. Yet he goes on to say what is very hard for us to say, let alone mean: "not what I want, but what you want."

Assuming the wants wrought in us by the world for security, for status, for power, for social acceptance are "givens", as given as the self-serving lives that follow, how in the world do we break free of those wants to want what God wants? One of my favorite petitions in the prayers we pray together is the petition: Lord, teach our prayers our needs. Put another way, I mostly pray "Dear God, help me to want what you want." God's help, in this regard, is seldom what we expect. Sometimes in the first world, we are so sated by our acquisitions—tangible and intangible—we actually begin to want deliverance from the encumbered lives lived in the shallow end of the pool. As with the rich young man, this feeling often passes! Other times, some great suffering or circumstance insinuates itself upon our otherwise satisfied selves and we discover that all the things we have wanted so badly are of no help to us in the darkness. In the third place, there is the vulnerability into which we all are born but from which some cannot escape because their physical or economic or geographic or emotional circumstances are simply impervious to the exertion of human will. Only God's will will do! In each case, willing God's will comes down to one petition: Lord, have mercy upon me!

This was what blind Bartimaeus shouted as Jesus was leaving Jericho on his way to Jerusalem. “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!” Ironically he is the only one who sees in Jesus God coming near, while the disciples and the crowd only see Bartimaeus as a nuisance and order him to be quiet. He cries all the more loudly, “Son of David, have mercy on me!” Jesus stands still and says, “Call him here.” Bartimaeus throws off his cloak, springs up and comes to Jesus. This is when Jesus asks a second time: “What do you want me to do for you?” The question *is* God’s mercy toward us. The wants of Bartimaeus having been wrought in darkness and rejection and suffering, he says “Rabbouni,” meaning teacher in Aramaic, “let me see again.” The coincidence between what the vulnerable of the earth want and what God wills is, in a word, miraculous. The blind man, who alone sees Jesus, asks of him what he has already been given in him. “Go,” Jesus says, “your faith has made you well.” He said as much to the paralytic and his friends, to the woman with a flow of blood, to Jairus at his daughter’s deathbed, even to the Syrophenician woman. He says this to those whose faith is given as they drink the cup of suffering, which is to say to those who in all vulnerability put their whole trust in God. Your faith, says Jesus in so many words, has made you wholly yourself. Go! But the man does not go. He leaves everything to follow Jesus on the way to the cross.

What do you want him to do for you, this Son of David whom to see is to be saved from the darkness of life without him? Maybe you still think glory or privilege or a life impervious to suffering is what you want. If that is the case, then as it was for the twelve until after Jesus’ death and resurrection, so you will simply go away sorrowful for now. But if you have reached the place where all your wants have begun to possess you; if you have been brought low by chance and all the little ways you used to keep yourself going no longer avail; if you cannot will yourself to overcome whatever circumstance keeps you from being wholly yourself, then as John Calvin

counseled, "...it remains for [you] to seek in him, and in prayers to ask of him, what [you] have learned to be in him." What do you want him to do for you? Pray for eyes to see him again, that you may want nothing more than to follow him on the way to being wholly yourself.