

Proper 24, Year B

October 18, 2015

Mark 10:35-45

James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came forward to Jesus and said to him, "Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you." And he said to them, "What is it you want me to do for you?" And they said to him, "Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory." But Jesus said to them, "You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?" They replied, "We are able." Then Jesus said to them, "The cup that I drink you will drink; and with the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized; but to sit at my right hand or at my left is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared."

When the ten heard this, they began to be angry with James and John. So Jesus called them and said to them, "You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many."

Isn't the Bible wonderful? It is so very honest! Its heroes and heroines are people with clay feet. Here are James and John, who, together with Peter form the inner circle of Jesus' followers. These are the only three whom Jesus allows into the home of Jairus' daughter when he raises her from the dead. They are the only three who have witnessed Jesus' transfiguration on the mountain top. Of the Twelve chosen disciples, these are the chosen of the chosen. And here, after following Jesus around now for at least two years, James and John take Jesus aside and say, "We want you to do whatever we ask of you."

You and I hear this and we shake our heads and say, "Those numskull disciples! When are they ever going to get it?"

And yet, if we would be honest with ourselves, don't we do much the same thing, perhaps not so blatantly? It is deeply ingrained in us human beings, and particularly us Americans, to want what we want, to think that we deserve it (because we have made so many sacrifices), and to demand it of others, or of the church, society, the government, even of God. "We want this, not that," and we get angry and upset when we don't get what we want. "We like this, not that"; and we expect to be given what we desire. We like the summer, we don't like the winter, so rather than appreciating God's gift of winter, we complain all winter long.

It's no different in the church. We like Rite I, or we like Rite II. We like organ music, or we like guitar music, or piano music, or no music at all. We like this

hymn or song; we don't like that hymn or song. We like a boisterous and "milling-about" passing of the peace; we like a reserved, "stay-in-my-own-pew" passing of the peace.

And we expect – perhaps not consciously – but we expect to be given what it is we want, and are deeply emotionally invested in whether we do or don't get it. As Richard Rohr says, just being born in America gives you an automatic PhD in Entitlement.

"Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you."

My friends, we need to realize that it matters little to the universe, to creation, and to God what you and I like or don't like. God gives us not what we like, but what is. And what is, is far more than we could ever deserve.

The *problem* is that we are so focused on getting what we think we deserve, what we want, or what we like, that we miss what **is**; we miss what it is that God is giving.

In doing research for this sermon, I stumbled upon a blog post by a woman by the name of Mandy Aubrey. I don't know who she is, but I would like to quote her at length, because I think that what she says is a message James and John – and all of us! – need to hear. She writes:

I don't know about you, but I am one of those people who find it difficult to think without judgment. For example, I see a tree. I decide the tree is beautiful. I make a mental note to buy a sapling like this tree to plant in my front yard...

Or, I see a tree. I decide the tree is ugly. I decide that the bark is peeling off in irksome ways. I make a mental note to *avoid* purchasing this type of tree for my yard. I wonder why anyone would buy such a tree.

Rarely, if ever, do I simply see a tree for what it is, minus all the internal dialogue that judges it and then forms an emotional bond for or against it.

I don't like that my brain works in this way so much of the time...

You see, a dualistic mindset causes me to miss out on the unity and wholeness of life. The attachment I carry with my desires also causes me much suffering. I am angry and disappointed when I don't get what I want. I

am disillusioned when I do get what I want, but it turns out to be something other than what I envisioned...

I spend so much time trying to decide what I *like*, and then trying to acquire it, maintain it, manipulate it, fix it, keep it. At the same time, I decide what I *don't* like, and then spend countless hours trying to avoid it, escape it, deny it, destroy it. Every encounter becomes another chance for me to label something or someone as “good” or “bad,” “liked” or “disliked,” “loved” or “hated,” “right” or “wrong.” Instead of allowing things and people to be as they are, I separate them into categories dictated by my own emotional attachments.

Instead of observing an event unfold naturally, I force an agenda. Instead of viewing other people as human beings like me, I treat them as if they were a project to fix or overcome.

Instead of opening my hand, I clench a tight fist. And as a person of faith, that's **not** how I want to be running around in life, with fists pumping.

I don't *want* to cherish my own opinions so much that I miss the greater story that is going on around me. I don't want to spend more time worrying about “good” and “bad” and miss the Jesus that is sitting right in front of me. I don't want to reduce this mystery called life to repetitive questions about “right” and “wrong.”

Please don't misunderstand me, I'm not abandoning the quest for truth. I'm not implying that all things are completely relative, or that nothing matters... I'm just saying that I'm ready to start giving up the incessant urge to judge, classify, and label. I'm ready to start giving up the need to protect and defend all the time. I'm ready to open the gates and say “welcome,” rather than adding another layer of insulation to the barrier.

Instead of sorting the puzzle pieces into piles, I'm ready to start fitting them together and appreciating each unique shape and the role that each shape plays.

I'm ready to start learning about detaching myself from my every desire or repulsion, so that I can walk more quietly and contentedly with God.
(<http://thekaleidoscopeproject.blogspot.com/>)

My friends, I know that's a message God is speaking to me, and – if I might be so bold – I believe it is a message God is speaking to all of us in our society, and in our church. It is time for us to look beyond what we like, what we prefer, and look instead to what is, and to what it is God wants us – both individually and as a Church family – to be and to do. It may look very different from what we are familiar with, but that's OK. It may require that you and I give up some cherished preference; that's OK, too. If it is from God, it will be far better than what *we* want, anyway.

It matters little to the universe, to creation, and to God what you and I like or don't like. God gives us not what we like, but what is. So why not appreciate it? For what is, is far more than we could ever deserve.

Let us pray: Gracious and loving God, help us to come to realize, more and more, that our habit of constantly categorizing things and people into what we like and don't like, want and don't want, keeps us from receiving and appreciating what **is**, what you **do** give us, which is always graced, and more than we deserve. In our personal lives and in our life together as a church family, help us to seek and serve **your** will rather than our personal preferences, and to realize that opening to your life and movement within and among us and seeking to grow the Kingdom of God in this place is far more important than our cherished wants, attachments, and agendas. Help us not to be so consumed with our need to achieve pre-determined outcomes; but instead, help us to treasure the process and, above all, the **relationships** along the journey. Help us to see the gift and blessing in choices and preferences which are **not** our own. Give us humble and malleable hearts, ready and willing to be shaped by you into your own desired form. Vulnerable – not hardened. May our attitude be not that of James and John, who said, "Do for us whatever we ask," but may we approach life like Mary, who said, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." (Luke 1:38)

AMEN