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## “What do you want me to do?”

Mark 10:35-45

A sermon preached at Page Auditorium on October 18, 2015

by the Rev. Dr. Luke A. Powery

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What have you to do with us? Have you come to destroy us? What is this? Why does this fellow speak in this way? Who can forgive sins but God alone? Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners? Why do John's disciples and the disciples of the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not fast? Why are they doing what is not lawful on the Sabbath? Do you not care that we are perishing? Who then is this that even the wind and sea obey him? What have you to do with me Son of the Most High God? Where did this man get all of this? What is this wisdom that has been given to him? Is not this the carpenter? Why do your disciples not live according to the tradition of the elders? How can one feed these people with bread here in the desert? Why could we not cast it out? Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife? What must I do to inherit eternal life? Who can be saved? Why do your people worship God at a place named after devils (blue devils)? These are questions people ask Jesus throughout the gospel of Mark (and at Duke Chapel). We tend to ask Jesus lots of questions, sometimes almost putting him on trial in the courtroom where we are judge and jury. Questioning God can be a way of engaging God and leaning into God's presence with deep trust and curiosity. It doesn't have to be combative or coercive. Questioning can be a form of genuine caring. You ask Jesus because you care.

The same is true for Jesus. He cares so much about us that he has his own questions for us. Why do you raise such questions in your heart? Who do you say that I am? In today's gospel lesson, he asks the disciples, “What do you want me to do for you?” Jesus asks that question after James and John tell him that they want him to do whatever they ask him to do. Sounds like a good deal to them, making Jesus a cosmic vending machine. Their answer to his question is that one of them wants to sit at his right hand and the other on his left, in his glory. They don't really know for what they are asking. They can't discern the difference between wants and needs. They want glory but demonstrate they have no clue what that really is. Jesus just predicted his death and resurrection for the third time and they are already considering their place in the new holy administration. One commentator notes that they were lobbying for “first and second cabinet position” even while Jesus was beginning his funeral procession toward Jerusalem. The disciples dream about palatial banquets celebrating Christ's coronation but what they don't know at this point is that they will eventually find two criminals on the cross with Jesus, “one on his right and one on his left” (15:27). That's where God's glory will take you—to a cross. The disciples ask for something they don't even understand.

People want glory, honor, power, wealth, and riches but as comedian and actor Jim Carey says, “I think everybody should get rich and famous and do everything they ever dreamed of so they can see that it's not the answer.” Be careful what you ask for; you may actually receive it. If you pray for rain, you will have to deal with the mud as well (Denzel Washington). If you ask for a crown, there will also be a cross because there are no resurrections without crucifixions. The pursuit of power is a manifestation of a present weakness. If you want glory, in the Christian life, it is gory. If you find yourself desiring to be on top, it may be like the top of a pyramid, where you are all alone by yourself—at the top but terribly lonely. There may be a price to pay for what you pray.

Before you jump on the bandwagon of thinking Jesus will do whatever you want and you can pull a slot machine of spiritual power and an utopian blessing will pour out, you should keep in mind that Jesus asks this same question to blind Bartimaeus after Jesus speaks with James and John. “What do you want me to do for you?” Bartimaeus responds, “Teacher, let me see again.” The irony is that Bartimaeus’ answer should have been the disciples’ response. “Let me see again.” Bartimaeus requested a need and the disciples, though they were not physically blind, were spiritually blind. They don’t really know what they need; they need to have their eyes open to their real needs and ask for it—“let me see again.”

This is true for us many times when we don’t even know what to pray or how to pray. We yearn to speak to God but maybe we have no idea where to really begin and how to articulate the sighs of our hearts with our stammering tongues. Maybe we should just pray, “Let me see again.” Let me see what I really need in my life. Let me see what I should really be doing in the world. Let me see what glory really is. Let me see the cost of glory and power before I start asking for it. Let me see how my life costs you your life. Our prayer should be the Bartimaeus petition—“let me see again.” Let me recognize that your glory manifests in selfless service, in dying to help others live and that to be great is to serve, to be great is to love, to be great is to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God. “Whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant.” In a sermon titled, “The Drum Major Instinct,” Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. preaches, this new definition of greatness “means that everybody can be great because everybody can serve. You don't have to know about Plato and Aristotle to serve... You don't have to know the second law of thermodynamics to serve. You only need a heart full of grace, a soul generated by love.” Let me see Jesus that I may see what it means to serve. The greatness of God manifest in Jesus is gory glory on a criminal’s cross and can even be seen with a basin and towel, when one is ready to wash dirty, stinky feet.

We have the different answers of the disciples and Bartimaeus to the question of Jesus and can affirm the truth that we may not always ask rightly or wisely and we should, as a former seminary peer once said, “check ourselves before we wreck ourselves.” Yet we can't underestimate what Jesus will do when we respond to his question, “What do you want me to do for you?” It takes courage to truly ask for what we need. Perhaps we don’t think God will answer so we would rather not ask at all and build a steel wall of defense around our faith and heart. But as the song says, “If I never had a problem I wouldn’t know God could solve them.” Prayer, telling Jesus what you need, is not a magic wand and prayer doesn’t change God, it changes you. Prayer doesn’t change things, God does. And Jesus is asking that question to all of us this morning, “What do you want me to do for you?” When you respond, you might be surprised by the answer you receive.

*I asked God for strength, that I might achieve,*

*I was made weak, that I might learn humbly to obey.*

*I asked for health, that I might do greater things,*

*I was given infirmity, that I might do better things.*

*I asked for riches, that I might be happy,*

*I was given poverty, that I might be wise.*

*I asked for power, that I might have the praise of [humans],*

*I was given weakness, that I might feel the need of God...*

*I asked for all things, that I might enjoy life,*

*I was given life, that I might enjoy all things.*

*I got nothing that I asked for -*

*But everything that I had hoped for...* (Soldier's prayer)

What is the one thing you want Jesus to do for you, the one thing you hope for but have been too timid to ask? Your answer may be what will help you see again as you wait for Jesus to act. If you never ask, you may never receive.

The question of Jesus is not only about us, probing our hearts and motivations; it also says something about God in Jesus Christ. "What do you want me to do for you?" It suggests that God wants to do something for you. Our misguided answers or unclear motivations don't stop Jesus from asking his heartfelt, personal question. He asks even if we answer in a distorted, unsure manner. He asks because of love. He asks because he cares. He asks because he wants to meet our needs, not that it is only about us in the Christian life. But today is your opportunity to answer his question, "What do you want me to do for you?" The good news is that Christ's faithfulness and activity is not predicated on our faithfulness or faithlessness. His faithfulness is predicted on the promises of God to be for us and with us till the end of the age.

That question from Jesus says something about God. How God desires to work on our behalf for our good. How God is willing to listen to our answers. How God is able to act, to do for us. How God serves the world through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. How Jesus is dying to love us as a servant king, a servant leader, revealing how his power is to empower and serve others through his cruciform heart. As Jane Austen wrote, "There is no charm equal to tenderness of heart." This is so true for Jesus. He's so tender that his flesh is torn from his body for us. We may not have the answers we should, but Jesus still raises the question and his glory shines through it, as he's willing to serve and die for us. Jesus shows us how to find our lives by losing them for the sake of the people God loves so much.

"What do you want me to do for you?" This is also a question we should be asking one another because

*If I can help somebody as I pass along,*

*If I can cheer somebody with a word or song,*

*If I can show somebody he's traveling wrong,*

*Then my living will not be in vain.*

*If I can do my duty as a Christian ought,*

*If I can bring salvation to a world once wrought,*

*If I can spread the message as the master taught,*

*Then my living will not be in vain.*

This is also a question we should pose to each other but that's another sermon for another day.

Today, Jesus is asking you, "What do you want me to do for you?" What will your answer be?