

## ***Doing What Does Not Come Naturally***

Mark 10:35-45  
October 22, 2006

### **I.**

I know that we don't believe in genies who grant wishes, but just bear with me for a moment anyway. What if a genie appeared and offered to grant you three wishes. What would they be?

Would you wish for money, possessions, power, recognition, or other things for yourself? Or instead would you wish for world peace, a cure for cancer, an end to poverty, or other things that would serve society and the world?

Perhaps, being Episcopalians who at times value the middle way, we might try to do both; a little of each. Perhaps we would use one wish for ourselves, and the other two wishes to benefit others, or visa versa. My comments on those kinds of choices will be left to another sermon.

### **II.**

But today's Gospel contains an element of choice like that, doesn't it? Didn't James and John go to Jesus and try to get a commitment in advance that he would grant whatever they asked? Didn't they, in effect, say to Jesus, "grant us a wish"?

And although I'm sure the disciples did not think Jesus was a genie, they certainly had seen him perform miracles and do things that no one had ever done on earth since creation.

Jesus had granted wishes. People asked to be healed, and they were healed. He made food appear from nowhere to feed five thousand people. He turned water into wine, cast out demons, raised the dead, and calmed the raging sea with merely a word. And James and John, along with Peter, saw Jesus transfigured on the mountain, and heard the voice of God not only tell them to listen to Jesus, but also say that Jesus was his Son.

This must have been pretty big stuff for two humble fishermen. What would you do if you were hanging out with someone who had done all these things? What would you do if someone you were working closely with appeared to be destined for greatness?

Well, you might start to plan ahead a little. You might start to wonder where this was all leading. You certainly would think that something big was in the works, and you would want to be sure that you were a part of it, wouldn't you?

Think about us here at St. Thomas. Suppose that we really start to pick up our activities as we put Katrina behind us. Suppose we are blessed enough to do even more wonderful things in the community. Suppose we can transform people and bring them to Christ. Suppose we can carry out some exciting ministries that bring God's love to others.

If we can do those things at St. Thomas, it might be only natural for some of you to want to become more involved. Perhaps more people would want to be on the Vestry. Perhaps more people would want to lead committees. Perhaps people would want to be more visible in the life of the church.

In a way, isn't that really what happened to James and John in today's Gospel? They had witnessed and participated in things that probably were beyond their wildest dreams before they met Jesus. They were caught up in a movement that already had produced crowds numbering in the thousands wherever they went, and they knew it was not because of them but because of Jesus.

And now they thought they saw opportunities that for generations had only been distant hopes for the Jewish people. They thought there might be a chance to cast off centuries of oppression of the Jewish people by pagan rulers—first the Babylonians, then the Persians, and the Greeks, and the Romans. And they saw an emerging hope that Israel might break free of the bonds of Rome and finally become the light to the world that had been prophesied since its beginning as a nation.

And all those hopes were centered in Jesus. The idea of a Messiah was part of the Jewish faith, and Jesus could have fit many of the Messianic prophesies. So James and John wanted to let Jesus know they were interested; that they were with him. In many ways, they only were doing what comes naturally.

### **III.**

And therein lies the problem. Jesus does not call us to do what comes naturally. Jesus does not ask us to do things that we would do anyway. We are called to do what does not come naturally. We are called by our faith to put things at the top of our lists that, in the absence of our faith, probably would be closer to the bottom.

I began this sermon by asking how you would respond to a genie who offered you three wishes. Think for a minute. Did anyone ever offer to grant Jesus three wishes? Recall today's New Testament lesson from the Book of Hebrews. Didn't Satan tempt Jesus in the desert with opportunities to glorify himself? Couldn't Jesus have had all the worldly power and dominion he wanted merely by saying "yes" in the desert?

Today's Gospel makes clear that Jesus did not come to work within the existing structure of the world, or to deal with humanity according to conventional standards. Jesus came to turn the world upside down. He came, as the Gospel tells us, to serve rather than to be served, and he came not to glorify his life but to give his life as a ransom for our sin.

The significance of this, however, was not apparent to the disciples, and even at his crucifixion their faith failed and they fled. It was only with the singular event of the resurrection, and the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, that true understanding became possible.

So, no wonder James and John did what they did. Would we have done any differently if we were there? I have said before that I believe the theologians and biblical scholars are a little hard on the disciples when they describe how the disciples "just didn't get it." It is only with two thousand years of hindsight that we can claim to "get it," and even now our understanding is not complete.

### **IV.**

As we try to understand today's Gospel reading, and apply it to our lives in a secular world, I would like to focus once again on what Jesus said at the end of the reading, when he called the disciples together. He said that "whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would 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 as a ransom for many."

These perhaps are the most frequently quoted verses from Mark's Gospel, and I believe they bind together two fundamental theological principles of Christianity. The first is that of servanthood; of the necessity of being a servant in order to have the greatness that James and John sought. The second is that Christ died for us to release us from the bondage of sin.

The first principle tells the faithful what they are called to do in this life. The second principle speaks to the Christian hope in the next life. The first describes our burdens, the second points to our benefits.

As a result, there are two great opportunities for sermons here. And even though it is tempting to preach on how Jesus' death and resurrection justified us before God and offers us eternal life, there will be other Sundays for that. Today, I want to continue examining the story of James and John because, in my view, it is the more difficult teaching of the two.

It is more difficult because while we are happy to believe that Jesus died for our sins, we might not look forward with equal joy to being servants. While we are thankful that the things we have done can be forgiven in eternity, we might be less excited about the call to serve others in the here and now. And while I do not intend to minimize the importance of the cross, we nevertheless find, as people of faith, that belief in Jesus' atoning death can come somewhat naturally for us.

However, as I mentioned earlier, some things do not come naturally, especially when we are not the beneficiaries, and especially when we are doing the giving rather than the receiving. Servanthood can be one of those things. We are called to place others before ourselves. We are told we cannot let our own personal ambitions interfere with our relationship with God. And we see that achievement is defined through service to others rather than glorifying ourselves.

This is not natural, and certainly is counter-cultural in a society that emphasizes taking care of number one. And it can be counter-intuitive when we are taught from youth that we will not be successful unless we set our goals and go after them.

So how are we to understand what Jesus meant when he set forth his model of servanthood? Well, I think there are several things that he did not mean. Jesus did not call us to be meek or faint of heart. He does not ask us to be doormats, or to allow other people to take advantage of us. We are not expected to just follow other people around and do whatever they want when they snap their fingers.

Servanthood also can imply leadership, and initiative, and the exercise of authority, but it all must be for the right purposes. As examples, I stood here a few weeks ago and deplored how we live in a world full of food and a world full of hungry people, and how there is something wrong with that picture. I also mentioned how by some estimates over sixty-five percent of disease in the world is linked to bad drinking water, and how there also is something wrong with that picture.

Dealing with those issues describes servanthood. And solving those problems will take leadership, dedication, initiative, and skill. At first glance we might say those are attributes of business leaders on Wall Street, or experienced governmental leaders. But they also apply to servants. And unlike many of those business leaders, people who fight hunger and disease do it not for their own gain but to serve others and to bring God's love to those in need.

That is the essence of servanthood. At times it can be necessary to engage the world in order to overcome it. And we cannot do it alone, merely as individuals acting by ourselves, although examples such as Mother Theresa are exceptions. Jesus left the Church behind as his body, and for most of us it is through the Church that we are called to act. It is through the Church that we can be effective servants.

Jesus charged the disciples with a life of service while he was alive, and through the Great Commission he has charged the Church with the same responsibility now that he is not here. And again, we are called to service not for our own advantage but to help others. Today's Gospel is not about us in here, but about them out there.

This reading from Mark tells us that just as Jesus sacrificed, so also are we asked to sacrifice. The nature of the sacrifice is different now, two thousand years later, but its character is the same. Here in the United States we are not subject to the threats, persecution, and fears that

hung over the heads of the disciples, but still we are required to exercise a servant ministry in our times just as they were charged by Jesus to do so in their times.

And there are costs as well as rewards of discipleship. We incur the costs ourselves in trying to bring the rewards to others. It's easy to love someone who loves you. The hard part is when they don't. But the Church enables us to do the work anyway. Through the Church universal, and through our parish here at St. Thomas, we can be the servants that we are called to be. The opportunities are here, and it is up to us to make the most of them.

## V.

James and John wanted to share in the rewards they thought were coming. And it is important to note that Jesus did not say no. He did not deny it to them. Rather he explained what was involved and what it would mean. Jesus redefined the rewards that James and John thought they were seeking.

And just as the rewards that Jesus proclaimed were not the rewards of the world, so also the same is true today. Service can create its own rewards. They are not rewards based on position or authority or recognition by others, but rewards that flow from the godly purposes we work to achieve.

We build the Church, and then we extend it into the community and the world. We bring our time, talent, and treasure to the task, and most important of all, we bring our faith.

And so we serve, not for what we might gain, but for what we might do for others. And we serve, not to promote ourselves, but as a response of gratitude and thanksgiving for what God through Christ has done for us.

Jesus is the model, and with the coming of the Holy Spirit the disciples became true servants. It now is up to us, also seeking guidance from the Holy Spirit, to follow those examples. Then, doing what does not come naturally might seem more natural after all. *Amen.*