

The Servant's Path

Mark 10:32-45
October 21, 2012

I.

This morning we heard the third in a four part series of readings from the book of Job. The last in this series will be next week, and so next Sunday my sermon will be about the meaning of that well-known, but sometimes misunderstood, book of the Bible.

Today we will follow the usual procedure, and take up the Gospel reading from Mark. We will consider James' and John's special, and also sometimes misunderstood, request to Jesus, and the implications of Jesus' answer.

And we might begin by talking about genies; those things that come in bottles and grant wishes. Now I know we don't actually believe in genies, but 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 two wishes to benefit others, or visa versa.

II.

For us, those are just hypothetical questions, aren't they? But that was not the case for James and John in today's reading. The situation was very real. And didn't they both go to Jesus and try to get a commitment 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.

After all, Jesus already 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.

This must have been pretty big stuff for two humble fishermen. What would you be thinking if you were hanging out with someone who had done all these things?

This leads to the question of what was going on in James' and John's minds when they made their request. What did they think they were asking when they said they wanted to sit on Jesus' left and his right, and what were their motives?

There are two very different answers depending on where you start the reading. Our official lectionary, which is the source of our readings, begins directly with the part about James' and John's request to sit on Jesus' left and right, but that version of the reading does not tell us anything about the background or circumstances of their request.

And most sermons based on that version would be very critical of James and John. The preacher might ask, "Who did they think they were, anyway?" James and John could be portrayed as greedy or self-serving, and trying to carry out a power grab when the other disciples weren't looking.

But what if we start the reading three verses earlier, which is what we did today in our bulletin insert? Then there is more context. We learn what Jesus said to the disciples before James and John spoke to him. We would know that Jesus told the disciples he would be condemned in Jerusalem, and mocked and flogged and killed, and after three days would rise again.

This could cast a different light on James' and John's request. In this situation, one could say they were responding and expressing their solidarity with Jesus as he neared his destiny, and wanted to be right there with him.. They were willing to share the dangers he said he would face.

This theory is supported by Jesus' reply. Jesus said, "You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink?" And we, of course, know that the cup to which Jesus referred was the same cup that he asked God in his will to take from him moments before he was arrested (Mk. 14:36).

Then we read that the other disciples became angry with James and John. If we accept the "greedy disciple" theory, perhaps they thought James and John were trying to get an advantage. The alternative, however, is that they also wanted to have been included in James' and John's offer to be with Jesus in his time of trial.

III.

We probably could go either way with trying to imagine what motivated James' and John's request. The real significance of this reading, however, is in Jesus' subsequent words to all the disciples. He said, "Whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all."

Are we excited about that? Do we look forward with joy to being servants? Perhaps not, if we believe that being a servant requires us to be subservient or subject to the control of others. But I don't think that's what Jesus meant, and so let's examine his words in a little more detail, beginning with a story of my own.

I have spoken before about a magnificent old church I once visited. An impressive large stone archway graced the front of the building, and elaborate hand carved double doors opened into a large foyer appointed with tapestries and lit by sunlight filtered through stained glass windows.

And there was a sign near the archway by the doors that had messages on both sides. On one side, visible to those going into the church, were the words, "Servants' Entrance." And on the other side, visible to those who were leaving, was the inscription, "You Are Now Entering The Mission Field."

I recall my initial reaction to the seeming disparity between the humble simplicity of the sign and the splendor of the church building. It didn't seem like people who worshipped there would be very active in the business of being servants. It looked like a church for masters rather than servants

But I soon discovered I was mistaken. That church emphasized teaching the Bible and strengthening the faith of its members. And it had active ministries working to help others in the community; spiritually and economically. The church effectively utilized the considerable talents, abilities, and resources of its members to do God's work both inside and outside of its doors.

The work of that church helped me understand that when Jesus called us to be servants he did not expect 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 requires leadership, initiative, and the righteous exercise of authority in furtherance of God's purposes. The skills and dedication found in corporate and business leaders, and experienced governmental leaders, are required to carry out essential servant ministries.

And the mission field of that church I visited was clear. It served its own people, and it cared for others. And its work included not only those who were economically disadvantaged because they needed financial or material assistance, it also included those who were spiritually disadvantaged because they did not know our Lord and Savior.

They were doing a lot, and there also is much for all churches to do. Some things have changed from Jesus' time, and some have not. Here in the United States we are not subject to the threats, persecution, and fears that hung over the heads of Jesus and the disciples.

But their work still continues, and we still are required to exercise a servant ministry in our times just as the disciples did in their times. The way we do it has changed. Why we do it remains the same. We do it to help ourselves, to help others, and to spread the Good News.

IV.

I began this sermon by asking us to imagine how we would respond to a genie who offered us three wishes. Did that ever happen in the Bible? Did anyone ever offer to grant Jesus three wishes? Didn't Satan tempt Jesus in the desert three times with seductively attractive offers?

We will hear more about that on the first Sunday in Lent. But for now I would pray that we remember that Jesus' response to Satan was not unlike the response we are called to keep in our hearts and mind when the world tempts us. He said to worship and serve the Lord. And that means serving God's people as well.

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 we can achieve the holy and godly purposes our Lord has set before us. *Amen.*