

Sermon Prepared by The Rev. Matt Rhodes for
St. Stephen's Episcopal Church, Forest, Virginia
Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost, October 17, 2021

(Mark 10:35-45)

*We want you to do for us whatever we ask of you.*¹

James and John haven't approached Jesus simply to ask a favor of him. No, they have come to him to make a very specific request. Looking at the wording here and the subsequent grumbling caused among their fellow disciples, I see it almost as James and John making a *demand* of Jesus.

This is a much different approach from what we have seen of the disciples in recent weeks. Until this morning's passage, rather than asking Jesus specific questions they often choose instead to talk among themselves. In last week's Gospel reading, for instance, when Jesus spoke to the man about selling all he owned, giving it to the poor and then following him, the disciples didn't understand – but instead of asking him about it directly, they opted to keep their questions to themselves ... wondering in silence, off to the side.

But here in this moment we have these two disciples, numbered among the very first Jesus called early on in this Gospel, acting much more boldly. They had something to say, and they came right out and said it. There's no hedging of bets here; if this is a poker game, James and John are the two players going all in on the very first hand. They're laying all their cards on the table in the hope they will get the coveted seats at the left and right hands of Jesus. They thought they were ready to assume those spots, responding to Jesus that yes, they could drink the cup from which he drank and be baptized with his baptism.

But were they *really* ready? This scene comes just after Jesus has tried – for the third time in this Gospel – to prepare the disciples for his own impending death. Even after hearing it that many times, though, the disciples still didn't understand what he was saying. By making their particular “ask” of Jesus, James and John certainly weren't anticipating at this point that asking to sit on the left and right hand of Jesus during this time would end up being what the theologian Charles Campbell refers to as “an ironic place of glory”² on the cross.

One thing I wonder about is which of the two wanted to be *the one* at the right hand of Jesus? After all, the traditional place of prestige and power is on the right – and they both couldn't hold that spot. It was considered a particular gift when someone received a blessing with the right hand, such as Israel blessing Ephraim in

¹ Mark 10:35 (NRSV).

² Charles L. Campbell, “Mark 10:35-45 - Homiletical Perspective.” *Feasting on the Word: Year B, Volume 4*, p. 189.

Genesis.³ In Exodus, Moses and the Israelites sing of God shattering the enemy with his right hand.⁴ The prophet Isaiah reminded Israel that they would be strengthened and upheld by God's victorious right hand.⁵ So as much grumbling as the other disciples displayed after James and John made their ask of Jesus, I have to think it would have been these two themselves at each other's throats determining who would get *the* best spot on the right.

I invite you to consider though what happens when the question remains the same, but the person asking it changes. Suppose James and John – or any one of us – come up to Jesus and without any pause he turns to us and says, “I want you to do for me whatever I ask of you;” what then? After all, he has done everything for us ... he has done *more* than everything for us ... more than we could ever expect. “Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.”⁶ In the words of Karl Barth, he offered himself as the judge judged in our place. He gave “his life a ransom for many ... as the representative of many, paying on their account ... what they cannot pay for themselves.”⁷

So if – and indeed when – we hear *Jesus* telling *us* he wants us to do whatever he asks, how do we respond? What could we possibly do for one who in that monumental act of self-sacrifice on the cross has done more than we could ever do in this lifetime, or in 10 lifetimes? I have talked in recent weeks about the many ways I see you serving God here and in the community ... what you are accomplishing and will accomplish in the time ahead through stewardship and outreach. Ultimately the decision on how best to serve is up to each one of us ... something that we alone must discern through our prayers and reflection.

Through our creation, our redemption and the love we receive by the day ... the hour ... the minute ... God continually blesses us with prestige and a prime seat. We are already Ephraim being blessed by Israel. We are already the people joining with Moses to sing of God's victory. We are those whom Isaiah said would be strengthened and supported by God. So how will we take those blessings and do what Jesus asks us to do?

Answering that question will not be something we will do in a moment. Service is a lifelong journey, one in which in the end we will discover we have only just reached the beginning. Doing all that Jesus asks of us ... doing *more* than he asks of us ... *will* change our lives, and it *will* change the world.

Amen.

³ Genesis 48:14 (NRSV).

⁴ Exodus 15:6 (NRSV).

⁵ Isaiah 41:10 (NRSV).

⁶ Ephesians 5:2 (NRSV).

⁷ Karl Barth. *Church Dogmatics: The Doctrine of God (IV.1)*, p. 230.