

WHAT DO WE WANT FROM JESUS? First Presbyterian Church of Kissimmee, Florida

10/22/06

Dr. Frank Allen, Pastor

Mark 10:35-45 (NRSV)

James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came forward to him and said to him, "Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you." [36] And he said to them, "What is it you want me to do for you?" [37] And they said to him, "Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory." [38] 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?" [39] 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; [40] 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."

[41] When the ten heard this, they began to be angry with James and John. [42] 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. [43] But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, [44] and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. [45] For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many."

DENSE DISCIPLES

James and John are like a couple of nefarious kids aren't they? Jesus, will you do whatever we say?

Did your kids ever do that to you? Daddy, we love you. And your heart melts. And then they say, "Will you do me a favor?"

And your affection becomes infected with suspicion. You know that they're up to no good. And so it was with the disciples.

The disciples just don't get it do they? Where have they been?

They were there when Jesus blessed the little children and said that the kingdom of heaven would be occupied with such as these. They were there when Jesus put a little child in their midst and said that unless they come to kingdom like this little child, with nothing to commend them and no expectations, they just wouldn't make it. They were there last week when Jesus told a rich man that unless he divested himself of his wealth, it wouldn't be possible to have treasure in heaven and follow Jesus.

Three times now Jesus had been absolutely honest about what it would mean to follow him. His way would be the way of the cross, a trip through the valley of the shadow of death. He could not escape this path and neither would his disciples.

And yet here we are again with the disciples seeking power and glory. What will it take for them to finally understand the truth?

Today's passage is bracketed by two healings. Two men blind from birth receive their sight. But, they not only receive their sight, they proclaim the truth about Jesus. They see clearly and follow Jesus on the way.

It's ironic. These blind outsiders see clearly, but the insiders don't see at all. The disciples continue to jockey for position and power. The disciples who were a part of the inner circle still think that Jesus is some kind of military mullah.

What do they really want from Jesus? They want a future that is assured. They want to be on his right and his left in glory. When the kingdom comes they want a seat on the cabinet.

You just want to smack those guys don't you? And it just keeps getting worse and worse. When the time comes for Jesus to face his passion and death, he takes Peter, James and John and asks them to pray for him. What do they do? They fall asleep. That figures. They've been asleep the whole time they've been with Jesus. Why not fall asleep at the end as well?

CUP AND BAPTISM

But, Jesus surprises me in our lesson for today. He doesn't slap his disciples or rebuke them or refer to their lack of faith as Satanic. He could have done that, and he did do things like that in some cases before. But, in this case he just tells them the obvious truth. Jesus says,

"You just don't have a clue do you? You don't know what you're asking? You want to be with me in glory, but can you drink the cup that I drink? Can you be baptized in the same way that I will be baptized?"

Of course they quickly say yes. "Where angels fear to tread fools rush in." And Jesus tells them it is true. They will drink the cup, the bitter cup of blood shed. They will be baptized into the death of martyrdom. It will happen early for James and later on for John, but it will happen. They will follow Jesus on this road that leads to persecution and death for the faith.

But, now they have no clue. They can only think about what they want from Jesus. They can only understand the kingdom in terms of power and glory and their own personal safety. And many even today can only think of Jesus in those same terms.

WHAT DO WE WANT FROM JESUS?

The question of James and John got me thinking. What do we want from Jesus? If we got that moment alone with him and had his full attention, would we dare to be honest and tell him what we really want?

I thought of that old song that Janis Joplin used to sing, "Oh Lord won't you buy me a Mercedes Benz." We used to make fun of that song. What blockhead would think that the sole purpose of the Lord of heaven and earth is to buy us a fancy sports car?

Well, turns out there are quite a few blockheads who think that way. Janis Joplin was a prophetess. They call it prosperity theology; they say that the devil wants you poor, but God wants you rich ... if only you have enough faith.

This kind of thinking is very popular, especially among evangelists of the TV variety, and there are quite a few Christians who are closet disciples of this new religion. They convince themselves that Jesus wants them to have a smooth life with no financial problems or problems of any kind for that matter.

And if someone is struggling, well, that person just doesn't have enough faith. They need to get right with the Lord and the Lord will bless them. I don't know what Bible they are reading, but surely it can't be the one that we read.

If we want this of Jesus, if we want Jesus to make our life secure by giving us a good job and a good salary, then Jesus will tell us as he told James and John,

“You don’t have a clue. You don’t understand what you’re asking. We’re not talking about the cup of blessing. We’re talking about the cup of suffering. We’re not talking about baptizing the life of greed. We’re talking about dying to the old way of life and embracing the new way of life.”

We do not need praise from men and women. We do not have to experience success as the world measures it. As Jesus told Pilate, our kingdom is not of this world.

That doesn’t mean we will quietly accept everything that happens in this world, far from it. But, it does mean that we will measure ourselves and the world in which we live by a different standard.

In our world everybody wants to be somebody. The Bible tells us that it began way back with Adam and Eve. The reason they ate the forbidden fruit was that they wanted to have their eyes opened and be like God. (Genesis 3:5) They wanted to replace love with power. And that has been the story ever since.

Henri Nouwen wrote,

"The long painful history of the church is the history of people ever and again tempted to choose power over love, control over the cross, being a leader over being led." Religion can be fertile soil for blind ambition. Those of us who sit near the Master are always tempted to do what we want instead of asking Jesus what he wants of us. Some of the most dastardly deeds have been done by those who have claimed to have been God’s right hand man.

The world views power in the form of a pyramid. Those on top of the heap have all the power. And the closer we get to the top, the more we are served, and the closer we are to having our dreams fulfilled. But, those of us who are disciples of Christ have a different way of evaluating things. The way of Jesus often leads us in a different direction.

I like the way Nouwen puts it. He wrote, "The way of the Christian leader is not the way of upward mobility in which the world has invested so much, but the way of downward mobility ending on the cross. . . . It is not a leadership of power and control, but a leadership of powerlessness and humility in which the suffering servant of God, Jesus Christ, is made manifest."

Like James and John we too struggle to embrace the way of Jesus instead of our own way. It’s not just a matter of being told the truth. There comes a point when we have to live the truth. We have to experience the truth of the gospel in our own lives. There comes a point when we have to take up a cross and follow him. There comes a point when we must drink his cup and be baptized with his baptism.

Paul wrote in his letter to the Philippians,
(Philippians 2:5-8, NRSV)

Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,
[6] who, though he was in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God
as something to be exploited,
[7] but emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave,
being born in human likeness.
And being found in human form,

[8] he humbled himself
and became obedient to the point of death--
even death on a cross.

One commentator referred to this as “imitating the incarnation.”

The world teaches us to value power and control as a way of shielding ourselves from pain. The one who dares to follow Christ allows himself or herself to become vulnerable. The one who dares to follow Christ deliberately exposes themselves to the pain and suffering of others.

The world goes its own way, does its own thing and minds its own business. The disciple of Christ gets involved in the messy lives of others. The one who dares to follow Christ does not run away from the world; he or she becomes immersed in the world, serving the least and lost among us.

And this is the strange part. When we do this, for the first time in our life we feel fulfilled. We find what we are looking for. We no longer seek authority and power, but we are aware that we have it.

Jesus put it this way, “Those who want to be great must be a servant to all.”

We cannot find what we want by seeking it directly. Our search will always be in vain. We must take that other path, that road which leads into Jerusalem and then to Calvary and then to the ends of the earth.

Are you ready to take that journey? Are you ready to lose your life so that you might find it? The way of the cross does indeed lead home.

Amen.

[FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH](#)

Carrollyn & Frank Allen
carrollynandfrank@earthlink.net