

Proper 24, Year B
October 22, 2004

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A couple of months ago, my wife and daughter drove me to the airport so that I could catch an early morning flight. I don't remember where I was going or how long I would be gone or what the weather was like or what I was wearing. All I remember is that as Cherry pulled up to the curb to let me out, my previously very sleepy ten-year-old daughter scared the daylight out of me when she suddenly shot up to the front seat, pointed to scruffy young man who was getting out of the car in front of us and said with excitement, "Look! It's Elliott!!"

Yes, it was the American Idol star himself, with his mother, and we were so close we could have touched them. Later my daughter expressed real dismay that I had not had the presence of mind to ask Elliott for his autograph.

When James and John approach Jesus in the Gospel story we just heard and ask him for a special favor, we might think to ourselves, "how childish and immature of them." But it's a pretty familiar request. They just want to sit next to him in his glory, they say. They just want to be close to him.

And who here has not felt the allure of being close to important or powerful people? I read the other day that the White House press secretary, Tony Snow, was speaking in Chicago at a special fund-raising dinner. He began his talk by saying, "Yesterday, I was talking with the president in the Oval Office." Then he paused for effect and said, "God, I love saying that. Just the president and me talking in the Oval Office, nobody else, just the two of us."

Being personally close to the president of the United States might not be your thing. But almost all of us get a special charge out of being with important people. Maybe getting to hang out with a celebrity like Brad Pitt or Angelina Jolie excites you. Maybe being with a star athlete like Michael Vic or a Country Music singer like Tim McGraw is especially cool. Think about it, if one of these famous people came to church here and passed the peace with you by giving you a hug and then invited you to brunch after the service, I'm sure the folks at school or the office or the neighbors would hear about it. We all like to feel special, and being close to important people can inspire at least a little awe and envy.

So, we should be mindful that the story of James and John approaching Jesus with their special request is really a story about you and me. Gospel stories like these aren't recorded in the Bible so that we can ponder how peculiar characters like James and John are. No, these stories are recorded so that we can see ourselves a little more clearly and understand ourselves more deeply.

With that in mind, I invite you to ponder this Gospel lesson again. James and John approach Jesus and say to him, "Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you." If you've ever prayed to God, the fact is, you've done the same thing. We

approach God by getting on our knees perhaps and then asking God to do for us whatever we want at the time.

And listen to Jesus' response in the Gospel lesson. "What is it you want me to do for you?" he asks. This is a question Jesus asks often in the Gospels. "What do you want me to do for you?" And if the Gospel is going to be a living reality in your life and not just an object of study, maybe we should hear Jesus asking us this very question.

So, what do you want? Deep down, what do you want God to do for you? Think about how you would answer that question.

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Is it eternal life?

Is it a deep sense of peace and joy that you want?

Or is it that you just want God to show you how to live your life in a way that pleases God?

As Jesus asked James and John, so he asks each of us, "What is it you want me to do for you?"

And whatever it is that you answer when Jesus asks you this question, now listen to Jesus' response. "You do not know what you are asking." "You do not know what you are asking." That's what he says to James and John, and that's most likely what he says to us.

And we really do not know what we are asking. Because, if we want eternal life, he says, "Sell your possessions and give the money to the poor." If we want a deep sense of peace and joy, he says, "Become last of all and servant of all, because the last shall be first." And if all we want is for God to show us how to live our life in a way that pleases God, he says, "Deny yourself, take up your cross, and come follow me."

The way James and John approach Jesus is the way we often approach God in prayer. We are approaching the right person, but we don't really know what we are asking. We want to be successful and important – we want the kind of power or even celebrity that makes other people look up to us. But we also deep down want that Peace that passes understanding, the peace and joy that come from loving and caring for others. The trouble is that being successful in the world and being close to God are often very much at odds with each other. And the truth is that most of us spend more time trying to be successful in the world, and only once in a while approach God in prayer, asking for something deeper.

And when we do this, God looks at the way we are living our lives and then looks at our request and then says, "You really don't know what you are asking."

We spend our very best time and energy going to the best schools, or getting our children into the best schools, so that we can get the best jobs, so that we can make the most

money, so that we can have the biggest houses, so that we can drive the nicest cars and get into the best retirement homes.

And to do all of this, we need to be with the right people and go to the right parties and buy the right clothes and give to the right charitable causes where they print our name as a big giver in the charity's annual report. And this way of life is so expensive that a Biblical tithe, giving 10%, a dime on every dollar that comes our way, giving 10% for our common life at church, where our gift is anonymous, seems grossly impractical.

And we are so busy trying to succeed and so tired from our efforts that we hardly have time for prayer, time for weekly worship, time for the poorest of the poor.

Some time ago, I read about a professor at Princeton University who was doing a study on the factors that enable us to act lovingly toward one another and care for one another, along with the factors that work against such behavior.

The professor recruited 15 volunteers from his class who were told to meet at his office at 2:00 in the afternoon. They were divided into three groups and each given a packet with instructions. The first group received instructions that they were to go to the other side of campus to a particular building in the next fifteen minutes. Since time was important, they were not to stop or be diverted in any way. If they were late, their grade would be docked. The second group received instructions that they were to meet across campus in 45 minutes, plenty of time to get where they were supposed to be, and they need not hurry – they had plenty of time. And the third group received instructions to meet across campus at 5:00 in the afternoon, three hours later. Clearly the third group had plenty of extra time.

Unbeknownst to the volunteers, the professor had hired drama students from Princeton to be stationed along the way. One was holding his head in agony and weeping. Another was on the ground in convulsions, apparently vomiting. And another was lying face down on the ground, as if he had had a seizure.

No one from the first group stopped to help. Only two stopped from the second group. And every one of the third group stopped to help. (J. Claypool, *Stories Jesus Still Tells*)

All of which leads to the conclusion, of course, that when we are under pressure (for time or good grades or money, it doesn't matter), when we are under such pressure, we are much less apt to love and care for each other when we are in need. Is this why, proportionally speaking, poor people tend to be much more generous than successful, rich people? This sort of thing might cause some of us to ask ourselves again what generates the pressure and time constraints in our lives. And is it worth it?

And so we might listen again to Jesus' question again, "What do you want me to do for you?"... And when we decide, we might ponder, "Do we really know what we are asking?"