
We Want You to Do Whatever We Ask of You

A sermon by the Very Reverend Sam Candler
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Proper 24B

"Whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve."

Mark 10.43-45

So, here's the situation: You are on a journey with your leader, the most respected man in your life. He is your teacher, your most respected leader; and something in him commands not just amazement but also fear. He is warm and wonderful; he is powerful and awesome, all at the same time.

And your teacher takes you aside. He takes just a small group of you aside, his most trusted disciples. If he has special things to say, he is going to say them to you.

Here's what he says: "Listen, we're going up to Jerusalem, the city of Zion, the temple where great things happen. But there, I will be betrayed. I will be handed over to the authorities, so that I will be condemned to death itself. But before that death, I will be mocked and flogged. Then I will be killed. Only, after three days, I will rise again."

Now, if your leader took you aside and said these things, if your great teacher and lord took you aside, specially, and said these things -- what would be the first thing out of your mouth?

I might say something like this: "Uh,, I don't understand. How could you be the savior, the messiah, and undergo such suffering? Isn't salvation an escape from suffering? Isn't the way supposed to be easy? And what exactly does it mean to rise again? What is that all about?"

Or one of my more brazen companions might say, "Oh no, Lord. This suffering will never happen to you." (That's what Saint Peter said.)

Those are the kinds of things I imagine someone would say. What would be the first thing out of your mouth?

Well, look again at the scriptures. Here's the first thing the disciples James and John said;

"Hey, Jesus, we want you to do whatever we ask of you."

What?

After these eerie and rough predictions, the only thing James and John have to say is "Hey, teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you." Can you imagine anything more stupid and selfish at the same time?

You know, all these disciples in the New Testament, we call them Peter and James and John, and Judas and Thomas and

Philip and Matthew. But they could just as well be called: Sam and Joe, Jane and Susan, George and John Mark and Todd, Beth and Carolynne.

I think it was two of us who answered Jesus in that way. When he told us, day after day, Sunday after Sunday, year after year, what it was we were supposed to do. When he told us that the way of faith is not the easy way, that it is a way of self-giving and service.

When he told us that the way of salvation is the way of self-giving and service, we immediately popped up and said, "What's in it for me?"

What's in it for us? We want you to do whatever we ask of you. Essentially, with that request, James and John were making their Lord out to be their servant. They were making God out to be their hired hand. They were making God out to be only a slave, given over to doing what they wanted for themselves.

"We want you to do whatever we ask of you. "

Listen to how we pray. "Lord, please give me this. Please grant me that. Lord, please make me happy again. Lord, please take me out of this depression and anxiety."

"Lord, please do whatever I ask of you."

Listen to how we treat each other, even in our churches and in our communities of faith. Please take care of me. Please do what I want.

I think this is why Jesus seems reluctant sometimes, in the gospels, for his reputation to get around. He certainly did heal people and touch folks with grace. He certainly did cast out demons and lift people up. But then he would say, "Don't tell anyone about this. Don't tell anyone about me."

That was because the healing of Jesus was not like the world's healing. The healing of Jesus was never meant just for one person's selfish desires. Healing and making people whole was meant for the greater glory of the world and for the greater glory of God.

And the ultimate healing of Jesus, the ultimate salvation of the world, would not be complete until the world had betrayed Jesus and put him to death. The way of salvation was not complete for Jesus until he had given up himself.

Thus, the way of salvation for us, too, is not complete, until we have turned over ourselves. We do not become the full followers of Jesus until we have learned, too, what it means to lose our self, to die to our self.

As long as we are asking, "What's in it for me? --as long as we are asking "Hey Jesus, we want you to do whatever we ask" -- then we have not gotten it yet. We've not understood just what this Christian salvation is.

Jesus does not need folks who see God as just another servant for themselves. Jesus does not need folks who understood God as just a hired hand.

Jesus is looking for folks who will become servants themselves. This Christian enterprise is not about being saved. This Christian enterprise is about saving other people! Saving somebody else!

This is one of the most dreadful calamities of present day Christianity. Everybody is clamoring over themselves. Look at me. Pay attention to me. Let's do it my way. Take care of my needs. Serve me.

So Jesus looked at James and John and said:

You don't even 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"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. (Mark 10.38-45)

You know, the divine way is strange. When Jesus hears the stupid and selfish disciples essentially ask him to be a servant, to be a slave, Jesus hands himself over to that very identity.

The odd thing is that Jesus really does become a servant. Jesus really does become the servant, but in a way that totally subverts the position. Jesus says that greatness does not demand service. Instead, service is the way to greatness. Greatness does not demand service; rather, service is the way to greatness.

If James and John, and if you and I, want glory with God, we are called to be servants of all.

AMEN.

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