

Twenty-first Sunday after Pentecost, October 17, 2021
“What’s In It for Me?” (Mark 10:35-45)

A court painter once painted the portrait of Oliver Cromwell, a man who was afflicted with warts on his face. Wanting to please him, the painter omitted the warts in the painting. When Cromwell saw it, he said, *Take it away and paint me warts and all!* Mark, the gospel writer, is the painter this morning, and in his gospel, he shows Jesus’ disciples just as they are – warts and all. He shows us that the disciples were not a company of saints, but twelve ordinary men with the same human faults and failings as us.

In today’s text, two of these ordinary men, James and John, the sons of Zebedee, approach Jesus with a request: *Teacher, we want you to do whatever we ask of you.* That’s pretty bold. *Whatever we ask.* Because Jesus is very familiar with human nature, he probably sighs heavily when he asks, *What do you want me to do for you?* And they tell him. *Let one of us sit at your right hand and the other at your left in your glory.* Again, very bold.

Mark tells the story like it is, unlike Matthew, who may have sugar-coated it a bit. In Matthew, it is the mother of James and John who comes to Jesus. Perhaps Matthew felt such a request unworthy of an apostle, and to save the reputation of James and John, attributed it to the ambition of their mother. But Mark shows us the real people Jesus chose to help him change the world.

The wart Mark reveals this morning is ambition. James and John were very ambitious. When all was said and done, and Jesus’ triumph was complete, they aimed to be sitting right alongside Jesus in places of honor. After all, they had left their former lives – their family, friends, homes, and jobs – to follow him. And they were among Jesus’ closest confidants. More than once he had made them part of his inner circle. Surely, they should be rewarded for their efforts.

So they approach Jesus with one question in the back of their minds, a question they, no doubt, had asked themselves from the beginning: *What’s in it for me? Tell me, Jesus, after all this, what’s in it for me?* They have given of themselves, they have made sacrifices, and now they want their piece of the pie. They want to sit at the head table. They want the corner office with the great view. They want power, influence, to be connected. That’s the least their Master could do for them.

They’re not really that different from us, are they? We too ask the same question. Before accepting employment with a new company, we want to know, *What’s in it for me?* Before committing our time and energy to a civic group or organization, we ask ourselves, *What’s in it for me?* Before investing our money with a certain institution, before taking on the task of caring for an aging relative, before entering any kind of relationship, we want to know *What’s in it for me?* We want to make sure our needs will be met, or that we will be rewarded in some way, or that the benefits outweigh the cost involved.

Although we’ve uncovered one of James and John’s warts, there is one admirable thing about their request: they definitely have faith in Jesus. They know who he is. They recognize him as the Messiah, the One sent from God.

But what they don't understand at all is the nature of the kingdom. They believe – like most of the Jews – that the Messiah will be a conquering hero, who will overthrow the Roman Empire and set up the Kingdom of God right then and there. This is what James and John have in mind when they speak of Jesus coming into his glory. Yet, even though they are confused about his messianic role, they see in this Galilean carpenter the one through whom God's glory will be revealed.

But the Bible presents a very different idea of Jesus coming into his glory. Those of us who live on this side of the cross know when it happened. We also know who was at his right and at his left when it occurred. It wasn't two disciples, but two thieves – one who joined the crowd in taunting him and one who asked to be remembered. Jesus came into his glory through his death on an old, rugged cross on a hill called Calvary. That's where he received his crown.

So when James and John approach him, Jesus knows that suffering and death lie in his future and he knows equally well that's not what the two disciples have in mind. So he tells them, *You don't know what you are asking*. But they should know. He has prophesied three times now that he will suffer, be killed, and rise again. Furthermore, as good Jews, they should know that prophecy after prophecy in the Old Testament describe the coming Messiah not as One who would be hailed as a conquering hero, but One who would be a suffering servant.

Our first reading from Isaiah is a perfect example. Isaiah prophesied that the Messiah would be unjustly killed, and in his death, he would bear our infirmities, carry our diseases, and be wounded for our transgression. Upon him would be the punishment that would make us whole, and by his bruises we will be healed. He would be like a lamb led to slaughter. *This* has been God's plan all along. And this is the cup Jesus has in mind when James and John approach him about places of honor in his future glory.

Jesus' death – and his entire ministry – were about service and sacrifice. The gospel stories don't show him hob-knobbing with the rich and famous. He had no home of his own, no possessions except the clothes on his back. His ministry was spent serving the poor, the sick, the lost, and those living on the fringe of society. For Christ, the path to glory was through following the path of service. And that's the path he calls each of us to follow.

In his letter to the Philippians, Apostle Paul also exhorts us to take that path. He challenges us to have the same mind that was in Christ Jesus, the very One who was God and equal to God in all respects, but the One who humbled himself and took on the form of a servant, becoming obedient to the point of death.

Like James and John, we too often want it all – power, prestige, wealth, and others serving us. When we come asking, *What's in it for me?*, the path of service is not what we have in mind. But Jesus tells the disciples and us that whoever wishes to become great must become a servant, and whoever wishes to be first must be servant of all. He turns everything upside down. He tells us that our value is not found in what we *have*, but in what we *do*, namely in service to others. Without the cross, there is no crown.

Do the disciples understand what Jesus is telling them? They think they do. Can they drink from the cup from which Jesus drinks? They think they can. *We are able*, they answer.

When the other ten hear this conversation, they are filled with anger and resentment. Immediately, that old controversy about who is to be greatest begins to rage again. Why do they become angry? Because they, too, have been asking the same question: *What's in it for me?* They, too, want their places of honor, but James and John have beaten them to the punch.

Jesus has to settle this once and for all. He calls the disciples together and explains the difference between greatness in the world and greatness in the kingdom – a difference we need to hear again. Greatness in the world is measured by a number of things: the number of possessions we own, the number of employees we supervise, the amount of authority given us, and so on. But in the kingdom, none of that matters. What matters is service – doing everything we can for God and God's people – even if it means sacrificing something dear to us. Isn't that what Christ did? He sacrificed his very life to offer us forgiveness of sins so that we might be reconciled with God.

At the end of today's text, Jesus describes himself as a ransom for many. A ransom is something you pay to set someone else free. Jesus ransomed us by changing places with us. He exchanged his life for ours. And because of the tremendous sacrifice he made, you and I can live each and every day in the grace of God. Each and every day we can experience forgiveness, healing, wholeness, peace and joy made possible only through the cross.

Jesus made the great swap, exchanging our sin for his righteousness. And that very act provides us with a wonderful example of what he is calling us to do, as well. He's calling us to get down into the trenches, to get our hands dirty, to work alongside our siblings in Christ in loving service to others. He's calling us to put the needs of the world above our own, even if it means parting with something dear to us. That's what living in the kingdom of God means. That's what the Christian life is about. The Christian, then, doesn't have to ask the question, *What's in it for me?* because we know.

We have the promise of eternal life with God in heaven. We have places of honor awaiting us in the kingdom.

It is because we have already received this gift that God calls us to respond with joy and thanksgiving, to follow the example of the Lord in giving ourselves away, so that we might make a real difference in the world. And that's what God wants us to do: to make a difference. He wants us to ask, *What can I do for you?* rather than *What's in it for me?* That question has been answered through the cross. Amen.