

Doing All That is Asked

(Mark 10:35-45)

Sermon delivered by The Rev. Matt Rhodes at Christ Church, Millwood, Virginia
The Twenty-second Sunday after Pentecost, October 21, 2018

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable to you, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

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

James and John have not 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 tend to view it as James and John making a **demand** of Jesus.

Admittedly, 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 have often chosen instead to talk among themselves. In a recent reading, for instance, when Jesus was speaking to the man about selling all he owned, giving it to the poor and then following him, they did not understand – but instead of asking their teacher directly, they wondered about it among themselves, 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, being much bolder. They had something to say, and they came right up and said it. There is 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 are laying all their cards on the table in the hope that they will get the coveted seats at the left and right hands of Jesus. And 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**? This scene comes just after Jesus has predicted for the third time in this Gospel his own imminent death. Even after hearing it that many times, though, the disciples still did not understand what he was saying. By making their particular “ask” of Jesus, James and John certainly were not anticipating at this point that asking to sit on the left and right hand of Jesus during this time would end up being “an ironic place of glory”² on the cross. Remember: it was two thieves who ended up hanging on either side of Jesus.

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 could not

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.

hold that spot. It was considered a particular gift when someone received a blessing with the right hand, such as Israel blessing Ephraim in 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 these two would have been at each other's throats determining who would get the best spot on the right.

But 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 – 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 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 has done more than we could ever do in this lifetime, or in 10 lifetimes? I have talked a great deal in recent weeks about the many ways that we can serve God here and in the community ... what we can accomplish through our stewardship and our outreach. Ultimately the decision on how best to serve is up to each one of us ... something that we alone can 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. 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 at 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. We are explorers in this life, traveling to address the needs of the world. And in the words of T. S. Eliot,

*We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring*

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.

*Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.*⁸

Amen.

⁸ T. S. Eliot, *Little Gidding (V)*. <http://www.columbia.edu/itc/history/winter/w3206/edit/tseliotlittlegidding.html>