

October 21, 2018

Sermon preached at St. John's Episcopal Church, West Hartford, CT

The Reverend William J. Eakins

Proper 24, Year B, Track 2

[Isaiah 53:4-12](#)

[Psalm 91:9-16](#)

[Hebrews 5:1-10](#)

[Mark 10:35-45](#)

“Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you.” Well, at least there’s an honesty to that statement, however presumptuous and selfish it may be. James and John are not at all shy about speaking right up and getting Jesus’ attention. But there is clearly an artfulness to their request: the two disciples want Jesus to commit himself to action, without specifically knowing what he is expected to do. It sounds a lot like children who, not quite certain what their parents’ reaction might be, first test the waters: “If I tell you something, will you promise not to be angry?”

Jesus, however, gets down to brass tacks: “What is it you want me to do for you?” James and John then blurt out the great favor they have in mind, “Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory.” The two sons of Zebedee, James and John, have come a long way since they first left their father mending nets by the side of Lake Galilee and took up Jesus’ invitation to follow him. They have seen their Master do many a wonderful thing. They have been moved and perplexed as he has spoken to them about the Kingdom of God. Through it all, the conviction has grown within them that Jesus is indeed the long expected Messiah who will restore the fortunes of Israel and reign on the throne of the great King David. True, Jesus has startled them from time to time with gloomy predictions about the betrayal and death that await him in Jerusalem. James and John have found this talk hard to take. Jesus must simply be mistaken about what will happen to him. God would never allow the beloved Chosen One to suffer such indignities as Jesus foretold. Surely, glory, honor, and dazzling power await Jesus in Jerusalem. God would see to that! And so, James and John have apparently begun to muse on their own destiny. After all, were they not among the first disciples? Has Jesus not repeatedly treated them as members of his inner circle? If then, Jesus, their teacher, is going to reign on the throne of David, maybe they, James and John, can sit on the seats of honor and share a bit of the glory and power that will be given to Jesus. Won’t it be grand! No more hauling in those heavy, smelly fishing nets! No more walking down those dusty roads, never knowing where their next meal was coming from! They’ll soon be sitting on their golden thrones, dressed in purple robes, feasting sumptuously every day, giving orders left and right, and being looked up to by everyone, even the other disciples.

I don’t think those two sons of Zebedee are any different from you and me. “We want you to do what whatever we ask of you.” Sounds a lot like many of the prayers we offer, doesn’t it? “O God, please be like the genie from the lamp and give us our heart’s desire: a better job, a happier marriage, successful children, more money, good health, an end to war. O God, give us these things!”

Likewise, we have the same trouble as James and John in accepting suffering and pain as part of God’s plan. In fact, we would like to think that if God were really on the ball, we will be exempt from trouble of any kind. The Psalm that we said this morning will come true, “no evil shall happen to us, neither shall any plague come near our dwelling.” The end result of such religion is that we feel we have a right to a trouble free existence. Like James and John, we can make no sense of a Chosen One who suffers. Surely God must have a different plan,

Note that Jesus’ reply to James and John is, “You do not know what you are asking.” They do not know what it means to request places of honor because they cannot comprehend that the road to Jesus’ glory necessarily leads through suffering and death. When Jesus goes on to ask, “Are you able to drink the cup that I drink or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?” he is saying that if James and John want to share his destiny, they will have to pay the same price as Jesus does – the pouring out, the giving of their very lives. “Are you able to do this?” Jesus asked.

Down through the centuries Jesus asks the same question to us as well. It is a question that challenges our human tendency to try to control God and have God give us “whatever we ask.” It is also a question that challenges our assumption that religion will protect us from anything bad happening. Jesus is telling us that if we are to be his disciples and follow him, we shall have to put our trust in God, no matter what.

I never hear this morning’s Gospel without remembering Myra Silverthorne. Myra was a good friend and one of the wardens of All Saints’ Church in South Hadley when I was Rector there. She was a retired social worker who spent most of her life in Holyoke, working mostly in an adoption agency with children and families. I think of Myra because her favorite hymn, learned in her youth and always treasured, was the hymn we sang this morning, *Are Ye Able?* That hymn, inspired by Jesus’ question to his disciples, was Myra’s theme song. She often asked that we sing it even though it isn’t in our *Hymnal*. The “can-do” attitude of the hymn’s refrain captured the energy of Myra’s commitment to the service of others, visiting the sick and elderly of the parish, often bringing gifts of soup, cookies, cakes, pies and casseroles from her kitchen.

I admired Myra a lot, but I must admit that I didn’t much admire her hymn back then. I thought it a bit corny – glib verses set to a sis-boom-bah tune. Then one day, Myra came to see me and told me in the matter of fact tone that was her usual style that she had just been diagnosed with a serious illness. Myra said she had no idea what to expect but she was determined to live her life at full tilt as long as she possibly could because she had important work to do and she wasn’t going to let her disease get in the way. Myra did just that, joyfully devoting herself as always to the service of others right up to her death.

At Myra’s funeral we sang *Are Ye Able*, as she had requested. Given the eloquent testimony of Myra’s life, I no longer found the hymn the slightest bit corny. Its words no longer seemed glib but profoundly true, the tune not brash but powerful. The hymn’s third verse seemed especially poignant:

Are ye able, when the shadows
Close around you with the sod
To believe that spirit triumphs,
To commend your souls to God?

Myra must often have asked herself that question during her final years as her body lost the battle with her disease. But I have no doubt about the faithfulness of Myra’s response. Yes, she was able.

Jesus still asks his disciples, still asks every one of us, “Are you able to be crucified with me?” The question arises in different contexts and in different forms. Are you able to be so thankful for what you have and trust God for the future when life isn’t turning out as you expected ... when you lose your job, your spouse, your health, your child? Are you able to forgive and keep on loving when others let you down? Are you able to keep on working and praying and **voting** for peace and justice when the political system is rife with division and discord? Are you able to give generously and faithfully to your Church, even in times of uncertainty and change, so that Gospel will continue to be proclaimed with power? It is no easy business to answer, “yes, we are able” when we are confronted with such challenges. It requires letting go of our preferences and prejudices, letting go of our control and trusting God. But if we do say “yes” and really mean it, then I believe God will take us up on our offer and do greater things for us than we can imagine. God will not give us whatever we ask. God loves us more than that. Instead, God promises to be with us always. And God promises to take whatever does befall us and use it for our good and for God’s purpose.