

"Be Careful What You Ask For"

Mark 10:35-45

March 22, 2015

Fifth Sunday in Lent

Several weeks after 9/11, a local television station got to interview troops stationed at a local military base, with a focus on younger troops, as to their thoughts on the changes in the world post-9/11. One was a fellow in his early 20's who exclaimed in a tone worthy of a petulant child, "I never signed up for this. I signed on to pay for college! I never thought we'd have to fight!"

It is easy to laugh at such a statement. Shouldn't you know what you are signing up for before you sign up? How can one sign up for military service and not know that fighting might be involved? It seems rather ignorant to think otherwise. It is also easy to become angry at such a statement. The military is all about service to one's country and not primarily personal gain (although some may be involved). It seems rather self-centered to think the military exists for personal gain.

Do you always know what you are signing up for before you begin any activity or join any organization? You confess to being a Christian. You claim membership in the "holy Christian Church, the communion of saints." Do you know what you are signing up for?

Two disciples of Jesus, James and John, thought they did. Despite the fact that, immediately before our text, Jesus predicted His arrest, torture, death and resurrection during their present trip to Jerusalem, James and John thought this would mean they could cash in on their discipleship. They came to Jesus and said, "Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you." Such a phrasing should have raised red flags for Jesus (imagine if your kids asked you that), but He simply asks them, "What do you want me to do for you?" They responded, "Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory."

They evidently thought that, since Jesus was going to establish a kingdom and be a king, then to be close to Him – at His right hand and left hand – would bring them power, prestige, and blessings of various kinds. To experience His glory, would be a wonderful thing.

We may condemn them for their self-centeredness in seeing the Kingdom of God as a means for personal gain, but are people today any different? People seek after God for worldly gain. We may not talk about sitting at Jesus' right or left hand, but who doesn't desire power, prestige, and blessings that being close to God and His kingdom should bring? Wouldn't experiencing His glory here on earth be appealing? Isn't this what we sign on for as Christians – blessed and glorious lives for ourselves? It is, if you listen to some Christians these days.

But do we want to be close to Jesus and His glory? Be careful what you ask for. When James and John ask Jesus for this, Jesus gives a strange answer, "You do not know what you are asking for." Why did Jesus say that? We, along with James and John, have a very different view of the Kingdom of God and glory than Jesus does. So when James and John or we ask to be close to Jesus and share in His glory, we don't know what we are asking for.

First of all, to be close to Jesus is not always an easy or enjoyable thing. Jesus tells James and John that to be close to Him involves drinking the same cup as He would drink and being baptized with the same baptism with which He would be baptized. From Jesus' prayer later on in the Garden of Gethsemane, drinking the same cup refers to suffering along with Jesus. Being baptized with Jesus means undergoing trials and tribulations with Him.

Secondly, to share in Jesus' glory is an entirely different thing than what James and John thought back then or we think today. Jesus' true glory is not in His power, majesty, and sovereignty, but in His weakness, servanthood, and death. After entering into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, Jesus said, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified," (John 12:23) and He talks, not about an earthly kingdom but about His death. Jesus' true glory is in His death.

Jesus concludes that James and John can and will drink from the same cup and be baptized with the same baptism as His, but it is not up to Him to grant who sits at His right or left hand in glory. (One commentary said that the two who really were at Jesus' right and left hands in His glory were the two thieves on crosses dying with Him.) Now the other ten disciples enter the fray. Scripture says that they were indignant. But it's not because they had any better view of the kingdom and glory. They were indignant only because that they hadn't thought of asking to go to the head of the class first before James and John had.

This is where Jesus got them all together and called time out. Jesus would explain what life in the kingdom was to be; what true glory is; and what exactly they had signed on for. Jesus said that this was not to be like any other kingdom which was based on members exercising power and control over one another. He said, "You know that those who are considered rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. But it shall not be so among you."

What is Jesus' kingdom like? How are members to act? Jesus says, "But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all." Greatness is to be shown, not by accumulating power, prestige, and personal gain, but by serving. Success is not attained by being boss of all, but by being a slave of all. THAT was what they had signed up for as Jesus' followers. That's what we have signed up for, too.

Why? The Kingdom of God is not a case of a Mighty Monarch requiring His subjects to serve Him. That is how we often view service – something good that we are forced to do by someone higher up than us in the chain of command. In fact, Jesus says, it is just the opposite in the Kingdom of God. Service does not begin with the lowly people at the bottom. Service begins with the King at the top. Jesus said, "For even the Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."

Jesus did not come to force you to serve Him. Jesus, the Son of God and Creator of the universe, came that He might serve you. He does not serve you by simply giving you the things you desire to have a good life here. He desired to serve you in a much more important way that you might have even greater things than an abundance of “creature comforts” and the happiness which they give.

Jesus came to this world because we were already slaves in a different kingdom – the Kingdom of Satan. We were slaves to sin. We were born with sin. We lived in sin. We could not keep ourselves from doing sin. We were powerless to do all the good which God requires of us. We were weak and unable to keep from doing all the evil which God forbids.

As a result, we were slaves to death. Because of sin, it was our inevitable destiny. Death is the wage which we earned for our sin. We would die here on this earth. We would then experience eternal death in hell.

In short, we were slaves to Satan. He and his demons harass us and constantly tempt us, along with the world and our sinful nature, to ignore God’s will, live contrary to God’s will, or try to exist apart from God’s will. Satan had death and hell which to frighten us and keep us under His control.

When people are slaves or hostages, the only way to free them is to pay the ransom to release them. That is what Jesus came to do for humanity as a whole and for each of you personally. The price to get back for God every human being who has ever lived, who lives now, or who ever live would be high. All the money and wealth of this world would not be enough. The world itself would not be enough. The universe would not be enough.

Instead, Jesus served you by giving His life to pay the ransom for you and all people. His death is the perfect payment and complete ransom. By giving up His life, Jesus paid to release you from the guilt of sin, the punishment of death, and the control of Satan and hell. His resurrection from the dead affirms the worth of His death and proves the sufficiency of that payment.

Jesus continues to serve you by distributing the fruits of that payment to you personally. You don't have to go looking to find Jesus. Jesus serves you by coming to you here in the midst of His people. Jesus is truly present in the worship of His people.

You don't have to qualify for the Kingdom of God on the basis of your worthiness. Jesus serves you with water in baptism to welcome you into His Kingdom and qualify you for the Kingdom by washing away your sin.

You don't have to wonder what Jesus thinks or feels about you. He serves you with His Word by which He speaks to you, using the voices of His servants, to read His Word for you in the lessons, speak His Word to you in the sermon, and pronounce His Word of forgiveness on you in Holy Absolution.

You don't have to try and feel close to Jesus. He serves you with His body and blood in the Lord's Supper so that you might be near Him in the most intimate of ways. Through the hands of his servants, He places His body into your hands and His blood into your mouths so that you might be united with Him in His love and forgiveness.

When Jesus talks about becoming servants, He is not forcing you to do something that He has not already done. He is calling you to follow Him and live as He as lived. His call does not enslave you, but frees you to be slaves to one another and to the world.

Because of Jesus' service to you, you are free to serve. Unlike James and John, you don't have to try to be good enough or pious enough to gain entrance and top billing in the Kingdom. You are already in the Kingdom and thus are free simply to serve. You don't have to compete with each other, like James and John did with the other disciples. You, like all of God's people, have all of His love, all of His forgiveness, and all of His blessing and are free simply to serve.

Will you ever be the servant Jesus is? No, of course not. Will you ever mess up and demand to be served, rather than serve? Yes, of course you will. However, there is full and complete forgiveness for all servants in the kingdom. And, as you remain in Christ by living in your baptism

where you were baptized into Christ; by remaining in His Word where He speaks; and by frequently receiving His body and blood in, with, and under bread and wine, you will continually be shaped and formed by the life and ministry of Jesus to be servants and slaves to God, to one another, and to the world.

Be careful what you ask for when you want to be a disciple of Jesus Christ. It might not be what you expect or want. You are signing on for servanthood and slavery in following a Servant Savior. However, it just might be more than you ever could dream or desire. In serving and being slaves, you can make a difference in our church, our community, and the world. You can find joy and fulfillment in meeting the needs of others. Most importantly, in serving, you will be with Jesus who “came into this world not to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many.” Who would want anything else? Amen