

Sermon for October 18: the 20th Sunday after Pentecost
The Rev. Nicholas M. Beasley

If anyone begins a conversation with you by saying, "Promise me that you will do whatever I ask of you," you should be concerned.

Readers of Mark's gospel hear James and John, sons of Zebedee, begin a conversation with the Lord that way today.

We are meant to remember that Herod's stepdaughter asked him a similar question some chapters before, when she planned to get John the Baptist executed.

John and James were not after anything so murderous and grotesque as a head on a platter. And yet their plans was almost as great a betrayal of God's purposes in Christ.

It is an easy thing to beat up on the disciples as portrayed in this Gospel; three times Jesus told them that he came not to be served but to serve, to give his life as a ransom for many.

And three times they did not have ears to hear and continued to dream of glory and power and dominion.

So, it is easy thing to castigate them for their power-hunger and worldliness and to then turn that condemnation on ourselves, if we too are hungry for power and worldly position.

That interpretation likely reflects more the worldview of the clergy than those of you in the pews.

But the church is a community of charity and understanding; a more charitable way to name the failure of James and John is to say that they did not know what they wanted, they did not know what they were asking for, as Jesus put it.

Perhaps that reflects the human condition better than a darker portrayal of all of us as power-hungry, ambitious political operators.

We simply do not understand the world well enough to know what to ask for; we ask wrongly; we seek the wrong things; we don't know what we want.

Sometimes it seems all that we want is what we don't have; that a purposeless desire to something new is our only driving force.

So what should we want? What should we ask for? What should we desire from God?

Perhaps we can answer in such a way as to give John and James a little credit. We should desire to be close to God through Christ.

Is that what they were asking for in their own clumsy way? Their words indicate a desire for glorious thrones with the triumphant Lord, but perhaps underneath is a more deeply felt desire to be close to Jesus and his Father.

John and James, who had left everything to follow Jesus, perhaps wanted to say:

Lord, never leave me or let me leave you.

Lord, keep me from selfish, self-serving ways.

Lord, do not abandon me to my individualism.

Lord, keep my heart brimful of your love and your Holy Spirit.

Let's give them the benefit of the doubt; perhaps that was what they meant to say.

And perhaps that yearning for closeness to God in Christ is what you and I really desire when grasping for everything else.

Our souls desire union with God, and we settle for many next-best-things; bodily pleasure; material wealth; social prestige; intellectual accomplishment.

The invitation to a more authentic discipleship is to get past those next-best things; to know ourselves well enough to name our yearning for God in clear and unambiguous terms.

The church was formerly quite comfortable proclaiming that a desire to be close to God in Christ meant embracing the suffering and sacrifice of the Cross in our own lives.

Now we are told that recommending suffering and sacrifice is pathological; for many the Cross is an embarrassment, not an invitation to a different form of life.

But we hear over and over that Jesus grew closer to the Father as he suffered; that as he became less, he became more.

In Isaiah today, because the righteous one received the punishment that made us whole, he is declared by God to be among the great, to divide spoil with the strong.

In Hebrews, we hear that Jesus learned obedience through what he suffered; indeed was made perfect through his reverent submission.

Jesus' willing weakness and suffering were his and our victory over sin and death.

He became closer and closer to his Father as he prayed, not my will, O Father, but yours.

He became closer and closer to the Father as he walked the way to the Cross.

And there is the invitation to us to a more authentic following of Jesus.

The closeness to God that we desire is found in the church, here where we drink the cup he drank; where we are baptized with the baptism with which he was baptized.

Your life in Christ began the day that you died with him in the water of baptism; when you were marked on the forehead with oil in the sign of the cross; when his suffering love was grafted into you.

Each week we meet him at the Cross, in the sacred meal we will soon share, by which the Holy Spirit continually draws us, through the death of Jesus, toward the Father.

We are baptized with him; we do drink his cup; yet like James and John we often ask for the wrong things.

The glory of our God of grace and mercy, however, is that the the right things are given to us, these extravagant means of God's relentless grace, this bread, this wine, that water.

And with earnest prayer, they do change us all week long.

So that we serve, rather than being served, so that we are willing to be slaves of all.

By these means of grace, we go to the Cross and know what true greatness and true closeness to Jesus really are.

When we serve all, when we are slaves of all, we serve the one in whose image they are made, our God who is slowly, surely, graciously teaching us what to want.