

WOULD YOU DO SOMETHING FOR ME?

Sermon Preached by Jon M. Walton

October 18, 2009

Scripture: Psalm 104:1-9, 24, 35c; Mark 10:35-45

I remember as I was growing up that one of the things I heard a lot around our house was the question, “Would you do something for me?”

“Would you do something for me?” my mother would ask, and usually it was something simple, something not too demanding, something helpful.

“Would you go out to the garage and find me a hammer and a picture hook so that I can hang this mirror?”

“Would you do something for me?” she would ask. “Would you hand me the TV Guide so that I can see what else is on?” (If anybody here remembers the days of TV Guide that really dates you, you know!)

Now those were all little things my mother was asking. Not very much required.

But as I got older and became a teenager and more preoccupied with my own agendas, those requests for a helping hand somehow seemed more intrusive, more demanding.

“Would you do something for me? Would you turn down that stereo, I’ve got your Aunt Pauline on the phone and I can’t hear what she’s saying?”

“Would you do something for me? Would you stop whatever it is you’re doing and go upstairs and clean up your room, we’re having guests in an hour and I don’t want this place looking like a pigsty.” Believe me, the place never looked like a pigsty, but it always seemed to be the paramount housekeeping threat for my mother.

It was always nice at school when the teacher asked you to do something for her. “Jon, would you do something for me,” she would ask, “Would you collect all the papers and stack the books over there?” And you just knew that if the teacher asked you to do something for her you were in her good graces.

The question, “Would you do something for me?” is a question that presumes trust. In fact, it invites greater trust because it reinforces the bonds that tie two people together and hold them close. Of course, we would do just about anything to help a person for whom we have affection or regard. It almost goes without saying, “Would you do something for me?” “Yes, of course I would.”

People often asked Jesus to do something for them. He was on his way to Jerusalem passing through Jericho in the last days leading to his arrest and crucifixion. A blind man by the name of Bartimaeus was sitting by the road and when he heard that Jesus was passing by he shouted out to him, “Jesus Son of David, would you do something for me? Would you have mercy on me?” And Jesus called him over to him

and asked him “What do you want me to do for you? And he said, “Let me see again.” And the man regained his sight.

There was a leader of the synagogue named Jairus whose daughter was dying and he went to Jesus and asked him, “Would you do something for me? Would you come and save my daughter?” And Jesus went to her and raised her from the dead.

Matthew tells about a Centurion who comes to Jesus and asks, “Would you do something for me? Would you heal my slave?” And Jesus does.

There were of course one or two along the way who begged him not to do anything for them. The Gerasene Demoniac for instance as much as said, “Don’t do anything for me! Just leave me alone, leave *us* alone, we legion demons.” But Jesus did something for him as well, even against the man’s protests, for his greater good.

People came asking him for aid and assistance and he offered it generously in return. Many of them were parents asking for help or healing for their children, and we can all understand *that* at one level or another, can’t we?

Which is why James and John’s request of Jesus is so jarring coming as it does in the context of the gathering clouds over Jesus’ head, the precious nature of the days that remained, and the sacrifice that so preoccupied him in those last days.

He had been teaching them about the way of discipleship. Two chapters earlier in Mark’s gospel, he told the disciples that they must deny themselves, take up a cross and follow him. “Those who want to save their life will lose it,” he said, “and those who lose it will save it.”

In that same chapter and in chapters nine and ten, three times altogether, he tells them that he must suffer and die. And it’s just as the bell tolls that final time that James and John come to Jesus and ask for just a teensy little favor. When he comes into his kingdom, they wonder, may they have the seats next to him, right and left.

And it would be laughable were it not so pitiable. What part didn’t they get? He was on his way to dying and he had said this was the way of discipleship, to deny self, to take up a cross, and to follow in the same way.

It’s truly ironic, their question. They ask more than they understand and seek more than they can comprehend. If they had only known then... that the ones who would sit at his right and his left when he came into his kingdom would be two criminals on crosses of their own, dying on a lonely hill outside the city’s wall. They were the ones who would sit on his right and on his left when he came into his kingdom.

Jesus had a lot of patience to put up with disciples like James and John. And I think most of us would have lost it by that point if we had been in Jesus’ shoes. Jesus tries to explain to them that they have no idea what they are asking. It is not for him to grant the seating arrangements at the heavenly board. They *will* drink from his cup, he tells them (think sacrifice, think Eucharist), and they *will be baptized* with his baptism, he tells them (think death, think water and the Spirit). But it is not his to grant them reserved

seats at the heavenly banquet. “That,” he says rather mysteriously, “is for those for whom it has been prepared.”

The other disciples, standing nearby, become irritated at James and John. Douglas Hare, a New Testament scholar, suggests that it was the *pushiness* of James and John that had the others upset, jealousy for not having thought of such a good idea themselves, anger that James and John had elbowed their way to the head of the line.

Their anger becomes the occasion for Jesus to instruct them on the meaning of service in the kingdom. It is like being a slave, he says, a person who has no honor or merit or degrees or chevrons on his robe, no corner office, no fellowships to distinguish her, no published books, no speaker’s fees, no consulting wages for expertise, no doctorates or ordinations, no sainthood, no titles, no reserved seats, nothing that would confer power. “You have to be servant of all,” Jesus said. And he would show them how.

“That all four gospels repeatedly record this instruction,”¹ says Fred Craddock, “is not only an argument that these sayings represent an authentic tradition from Jesus, but it also testifies to the widespread and persistent condition of a church that remained enamored of power and position. And Jesus’ words continue to be difficult to hear and to obey.”²

“Would you do something for me,” James and John ask. And it starts like an innocent question. Seems harmless *before* it’s asked. Jesus will do everything for these disciples. He will give his life for them and for us.

There’s nothing wrong with intercession, to ask God for help with the living of a hard life, and isn’t all life hard? “Would you do something for me, Jesus?” “Would you break the fever that grips my child? Will you let dad die in peace? Will you help me stay sober just one more day? Will you help me pass this test, get a job, keep my job? Will you help us get pregnant? Will you help us stay together? Can I come into your kingdom when it’s all over and just have a seat anyplace?”

“Would you do something for *me* Jesus?” And you know he will. He will do anything for you. “Ask and you shall receive,” he said. “Seek and you will find. Knock and the door will be opened to you.” Maybe not in the way we expect, but God listens, and God has compassion, and God loves us, like a parent loves a child, immeasurably, immutably, eternally.

But that’s not what James and John were asking Jesus. It was not a common intercession for help with a problem in daily life. It was an expression of a fundamental misunderstanding of what it was to drink from Jesus’ cup and to be baptized with his baptism, to be his disciple. Because they wanted assurances in the here and now about future perquisites of honor in the commonwealth of God. And that was a serious problem that Jesus had to address with them.

Gary Charles, pastor of Central Presbyterian Church in Atlanta, puts the issue this way,

In Mark the glory of God is reserved for servants of God who are not looking to be well compensated for services rendered but who are willing to follow Christ even to the foot of the cross. In a recent public prayer meeting, I heard a prayer that sent a chill through me, “O God,” the person prayed, “we know that you bless us with success and prosperity whenever we follow you.” That is the prayer of James and John. I could almost hear Jesus respond: “Only peddlers of prosperity dish up such self-serving pablum; it is not to be so among you.” Jesus asks James and John if they are able to be baptized with the baptism with which he will be baptized. They assure him: “We are able.”³

But we know better.

James and John are looking to the prize and not to the race before them. And therein lies the problem. Because disciples cannot get from here to there without walking the difficult way of following where Jesus leads, day in and day out, every day of their life.

Suppose, just suppose we were with Jesus now in the way that James and John were: palpably, really present with Jesus in a way in which we might hear him speaking to us (which of course we are). And suppose we heard Jesus saying to us, to you, and me... “If I ask you to do something for me, would you do it?” “Would you do something for me?” And I mean is there anybody here who if Jesus were asking that, wouldn’t be ready in heart and will to respond, “Of course, I will. Just ask, and I’ll do my best. What do you want me to do?”

And of course we’re all thinking there is something big, something great, something really important that will need to be done, and there we’ll be. Jesus has asked us to do something, and if it’s Jesus that’s asking it has to be important, and big. Something great.

And it is great...

He asks us to drink the same cup from which he drinks, and to be baptized with the same baptism with which he is baptized.⁴

But there’s one catch. Most of us are thinking big, something big. So we’re thinking he is asking us to drink the cup in one big, significant moment. But suppose we have to drink the cup not in one big gulp, not to take it all at once, and swallow, to die as he did on the cross; but rather to sip the cup for forty years, to take up the cross and follow for a lifetime.

Not one dramatic event, not one heroic occasion when the photographers come and take a picture of the moment, not one time when they ask for a quote about what led you to do such a remarkable thing... but instead to do something not very unique, because they are such small sips.

You go to bed, you get up, you support your family, you grow your pension fund, you volunteer at the shelter once a month, you help with the habitat house, and you keep up your pledge at the church. There's an older neighbor in the building that you help out with shopping every now and then. A friend you go and visit as much as you can in a nursing home. A woman you know who's not very stable emotionally and who calls you every week and you talk for an hour or so, and it helps her.

You know how it is with life, it's the baptism of the slow dripping of the water on the stone that wears things down over time and leaves an impression eventually, but not a great shattering edge, not a large mark, not a rending of things that's impressive.

Sometimes drinking from his cup is not done in one great choking swallow, but in small sips over a lifetime. Sometimes his baptism is completed by the slow dripping of water on a stone. And is that not being faithful too?

In a few moments, we're going to receive a wonderful class of new members and you'll have an opportunity to greet them at coffee hour. As you know we have four or five classes of new members each year and there they are, all these wonderful young, inspiring, hopeful people. Some of them new Christians. Some of them renewed Christians. Some of them have been in New York a long time, and some a short time. Some have been coming here to First and felt the minute they walked in that they were in the right place for them.

They praise the music and the preaching and the prayers and the beauty of the place. And they have kids or hope to have kids and the kids are bringing them as much as anything because they want their kids to grow up in the Christian faith and to have good values and something to hang onto in this big, tough city.

And I am always admiring of these new folks. They expect so much. They are looking for inspiration and hope and faith and encouragement. Every year I look at the board of faces upstairs outside the Parlor, the photographs of new members that year, and I start to notice that some of them have slipped away. Drifted out the back door. Didn't stay as long as they had first anticipated. And it worries me.

It makes me anxious that maybe we didn't do something right as a congregation, or as pastors, in our life together. Oh, I think God can do things in people's lives beyond what happens at Old First in New York City. And some of those people move away unexpectedly, or expectedly, and some have to work a lot of Sundays (in spite of the Ten Commandments) and there are a lot of reasons some people drift sometimes in their discipleship. I understand that sometimes there are good reasons why people drift away.

But I also wonder if it's because they have discovered that discipleship is a lifelong process of commitment and faithfulness and constancy, when they were bargaining for some quick and big and shining moment, a moment when the photographers would come, and someone would get quotes, and something remarkable and life altering would happen, and there would be a place of honor and celebration where they would take a seat.

We all of us have to keep reminding ourselves that most of the time, no, *all* of the time, taking up a cross and following him is a life long commitment... it has its moments of deep and abiding joy, memorable occasions and great satisfaction, but mostly” it is forty years of *sipping* from the cup, forty years of living into his baptismal identity – forty years of the dribbling on and on of commitment, or maybe, if we’re lucky, more than forty years.”⁵

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¹ Matthew 20:24-27; 23:11; Mark 9:35; Luke 9:48; 22:24-27; John 12:24-26; 13:12-16; 15:20.

² Fred B. Craddock, *Preaching the New Common Lectionary* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1985) 222.

³ Gary Charles, *Preaching Mark in Two Voices*. (Westminster Press: Louisville, 2002). 184.

⁴ Throughout the last part of this sermon I have borrowed liberally from the paper of Theodore G. Wardlaw who seamlessly interwove his own thoughts with those of his notes from comments by Dr. Fred Craddock on this text. Wardlaw's paper was delivered to the 2009 Moveable Feast as a paper for Ordinary 29, October 18, 2009. Since it is at times unclear when Wardlaw is quoting Craddock and when he is expressing his own ideas, I have not quoted distinctly Wardlaw's paper but quoted some phrases, and paraphrasing or borrowing ideas from time to time in the text without specifically identifying Wardlaw's words, but interspersing his words and mine. Craddock's comments were delivered to the 1991 Moveable Feast meeting at Columbia Seminary in Decatur, GA.

⁵ Wardlaw paper.