

“What’s in it for me?”

Scripture: Mark 10: 32 – 39

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We are now well into the season of Lent, a time during which we are invited to discern where we are in the journey of life, whether that be in the context of our faith, our general well-being, or alternatively take a prospective look at where we are going rather than where we have travelled. This of course is not necessarily only a personal analysis but one in which we can participate as a church contemplating its future. We at Lawrence Park, with Warren’s leadership, have already commenced this task in the context of determining our values and seeking strategic initiatives to invest our resources. Imagining, experimenting, and risk taking being paramount in making courageous steps out of the *status quo* box.

If I may, let me commence this reflection with some personal words. Twenty-two years ago I was ordained as a Minister of Word, Sacrament and Pastoral Care by the Maritime Conference of the United Church of Canada. This took place in Convocation Hall at Mount Allison University in Sackville, New Brunswick. It was an absolutely beautiful day and there was a perfectly blue sky. I recall the atmosphere of excitement that we ordinands felt at the culmination of a time of constant discernment; heavy and sometimes monotonous study; filling in numerous forms; attending all sorts of interviews; being questioned repeatedly as to our sense of call; and generally being subjected to intense scrutiny. There we were as the class of 1995 decked out in white albs and wearing various coloured stoles, most often the gifts of family and friends celebrating this event with us. In fact we looked quite holy! A few weeks earlier we had paraded out of the Anglican Cathedral in Halifax as newly minted Master of Divinity graduates of the Atlantic School of Theology. I recall the words of the recessional hymn to the grand tune of Abbot’s Leigh “Lord you Give the Great Commission” which speaks to the task of ministry and its required integrity.

As I now look back on that significant event in my life, I don't think I had any delusions of grandeur, and it never went through my mind that Rev. Eric Bacon would in any way change the world, let alone the church. Nonetheless, to have the process from discernment through ordination completed was a welcome relief. And all of us went our different ways to serve in the Maritimes or other locations across Canada.

I was keenly aware and realistic concerning that ending moment. It was in fact the beginning of the next phase of learning. I refer to on-the-job practice as well as the need to keep up to date and increase one's knowledge as much as possible with what is happening in the arena of theology and ministry. After all this is, or should be, central to the expectations of ministry. Theology like any other discipline is not static. Contrary to some thinking it develops and moves forward through a process of enlightenment, scriptural interpretation, and reasoned scholarship. I believe that many of you this morning can identify with this description.

Today it is not uncommon for clergy to be questioned as to where they stand within the wide spectrum of theological viewpoints. For my own Lenten discernment I have been attempting to articulate my personal response. This morning, if I may, I would like to share the significant aspects of my learning and enlightenment which to date have informed my faith and specifically the vocation of ministry. Here is my take, brief and to the point:

(1) The power of the Gospel, when approached with an open mind and a thirst for contemporary application, is absolutely loaded with direction and inspiration (2) The Gospel is the most comprehensive code of compassionate and caring human behaviour, because it answers the proverbial question "What would Jesus do?" (or expressed in a more direct way, "What would Justice demand?") (3) Scripture in totality should never be used as a weapon of prejudice, discrimination, or superiority. (4) The inclusion of conditionality as part of the "Good News" of the Gospel renders it contrary to the unconditional love which Jesus taught and showed us. Lastly (5) After sifting through what is meaningful in church history, orthodoxy, ancient creeds, dogma, and human constructed rules and expectations of the Christian life I am left with what for me is the heart of the matter, the centrality and relevance of Jesus to the here and now of our faith journey.

This is an appropriate segue into this morning's gospel according to Mark which Toby read earlier. When we look beyond the story this passage serves as a crucial message with which I venture to say that we all at some time have identified.

As I reread these verses, my mind immediately turned to a phrase that we sometimes express or think, "What's in it for me?" Today's message speaks to a human tendency for some persons to be drawn to positions of power and influence. The disciples have been together with Jesus for over two years. In this story, they are on their way from Galilee to Jerusalem. Though they don't know it yet, this will be Jesus' last journey to Jerusalem. Despite the attempts by Jesus to explain what lay ahead for him, the disciples have yet to fully understand. In fact immediately before this event, Jesus had been very explicit in predicting his death. This was the third time he had introduced the subject to the disciples. It is in this atmosphere of the unknown and uncertainty that these disciples are the ones prone to being used by the gospel writers as bad examples. Peter keeps putting a large foot in his mouth and here James and John try to get promoted to vice-presidents. There is no identifiable reason why on this particular occasion James and John chose to play their cards. Little did they realize what they were asking. What were these two disciples thinking? Well, they believed that Jesus was God's anointed messiah who would come to establish God's kingdom, or as we now refer to it, God's realm. They assumed that it would be the usual kind of kingdom as it existed in the world, bearing in mind that they were ruled by the Roman Emperor. In those times, a kingdom consisted of a court and a throne, advisers, officers, an army, and a treasury. Hence John and James saw lots of possible opportunities to be in the upper echelon. They craved power and control by wanting to be on the inner circle and next to the ultimate centre of influence. Clearly executive aspirations. However we must not be too harsh in our judgment and overlook the matter of pure ambition which is not the case in point. You and I know very well that this is not unusual behaviour in the various arenas of our world. When self-interests and personal agendas operate in one way or another in any institution, it can do immeasurable harm to its well-being.

You will note that John and James posed their request in a rather roundabout way. In fact a childlike way ... “Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you.” In doing so they are wanting guarantees before they even ask the question. Jesus knew these men and became wary of their request and so he demands that they be more specific. They reply “Let one of us sit at your right and the other at your left in your glory?” Jesus discovers, not unexpectedly, that their request is self-seeking. They want to get ahead of the others. They want special privileges. As Herbert O’Driscoll says, “They think a grand kingdom is coming, and they want some payoff and influence.

Jesus is angered by their greed and this is evident in his initial response: “You don’t know what you are asking.” And then comes the critical question asked of James and John in metaphorical terms: “Can you drink the cup I drink or be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with?” It is helpful to understand the Jewish expression “To drink the cup I drink” which means to share someone’s fate. In referring to his baptism, Jesus was alluding to his imminent suffering and death. But James and John couldn’t see beyond their vision of a grand powerful kingdom and didn’t have a clue at all what Jesus was saying. Still they are caught up with self-advancement and greed. They quickly respond without any thought saying that they can do what Jesus is asking of them.

I believe that there is an important lesson here in that often what we seek after turns out to be what we didn’t expect. The promotion which placed us in an unpopular position of authority; the responsibility which we wanted and which ended up with us having to do all the work; or the holding of an institutional office which gave rise to some accountability for which we were unprepared. We all know that it is much easier to second guess and criticize other people’s decisions than to have the task of making them ourselves. We must be careful when seeking after a specific role that we are fully aware of the associated cost or sacrifice. The wisdom of Jesus is well intended, “Do you really know what you are getting into?”

At the conclusion of this interchange between Jesus and the two disciples, Jesus makes it clear that the seating arrangements in God’s realm is not his jurisdiction. It is God’s, and Jesus is not about to undermine God’s authority. This brings us to the crucial message in today’s reading.

The difference between the meaning of greatness in the world and greatness in God's realm. Out in the world said Jesus, it is true that the great person is one who controls others; the person to whose word of command others must leap; or the person who with a wave of the hand can have their slightest need supplied. But then Jesus presents a complete reversal of these worldly standards. He spoke of greatness which requires us to be the servants of each other. If we have aspirations to be first, then we must be a slave of all. Jesus told James and John that he came to serve. Jesus' model of greatness turned the world's model upside down. Greatness does not consist in commanding others to do things for you; it consists in doing things for others; and the greater the service, the greater the honour. William Barclay refers to this as the "Christian revolution" ... a complete reversal of the world's standards. We see this reversal operating in the parables. For example, the labourer who came to work late in the day and who received the same as the labourer who commenced work at the beginning of the day.

And so we return to the original question, "What's in it for me?" Actually a great deal! The realm of God offers us greatness through service. The gift of oneself is the first and foremost response of discipleship. The great news of the Gospel text is that God has already given us that which is only God's to give, the realm of God and our place in it. Because it is a gift, God calls us to respond with joy and thanksgiving; to serve as stewards, not owners, of that realm, following the example of Jesus. In the here and now of the present moment we are called to be disciples and thus make a real difference in the world. What a wonderful gift! But at the same time what an awesome responsibility!

AMEN

