

SACRIFICIAL GENEROSITY

A Sermon Presented at Saxapahaw UMC on Oct 18, 2009

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Job 38:1-7 (34-41), Psalm 104:1-9, 24, 35c, Hebrews 5:1-10; Mark 10:35-45

Mark 10:35-45

James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came forward to him and said to him, "Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you." And he said to them, "What is it you want me to do for you?" And they said to him, "Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory." But Jesus said to them, "You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?" They replied, "We are able." Then Jesus said to them, "The cup that I drink you will drink; and with the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized; but to sit at my right hand or at my left is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared." When the ten heard this, they began to be angry with James and John. So Jesus called them and said to them, "You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many."

Every time I read this passage from Mark, the first thought that passes through my mind is, "Children, be careful what you wish for; you might just get it." I don't think James and John really knew what they were asking for when they approached Jesus and made their request. They start the conversation with a request to have Jesus do whatever they ask. As any parent can tell you, when a child starts a conversation this way, all sorts of alarm bells start ringing. After all, who in their right mind would agree to a request with out knowing what the request is? Jesus, in his wisdom (and I always imagined a bit of humor in his eyes), responds like we would. He does not agree to agree to their request, instead he asks, "what do you want?"

The request that James and John make seems fairly reasonable based upon the history of their faith and their culture. They respond, "let us sit beside you in glory." They are asking to have their hard work and devoted service rewarded when the Jesus "comes into glory." They

assume that Christ will “come into his Glory” by establishing a kingdom here on earth marked with treasure, prestige and power. They are asking for an earthly reward.

What they do not realize is that the glory that God has waiting for Christ is not a kingdom here on earth marked with treasure, prestige and power, God’s glorious reward is radically different, and it comes AT an enormous price. Christ understands the price and the reward. He also knows that James, John and the rest of the disciples have no clue what is waiting for them.

And I would argue, neither do we.

Jesus spends the rest of the passage trying one more time to change the world view of his disciples. He warns them that any reward which may be waiting for them will come only after they have drunk “from the same cup” as Jesus and been baptized “in the same baptism.” We know that the cup and baptism Jesus refers to is his coming suffering, death and resurrection. We know the disciples who wish to “live in glory” with Jesus will be tried, tested, tempted, abused, and persecuted for their faith.

Their reward will not come in this life, for they cannot lead as disciples of Christ by exercising the power politics of the world.

No, theirs is a harder, though richer life. Their reward is a reward of sacrificial generosity.

Jesus says, “Whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all.” The message Christ brings is an apparent departure from the Old Testament vision of power. The Old Testament has story after story of the faithful who are rewarded for their hard work with financial security, long life, healthy children, and powerful positions within the community. It is a “carrot and stick

theology”. Behave as God commands and be rewarded. Misbehave and God will strike you down. For the last few weeks we have read the story of Job. In Job we hear this theology repeated by Job’s friends and family. When Job is struck with misfortune, it is assumed by all that he sinned. Why else would these bad things happen to him? Though Job questions God and rages at God for the injustice of the events which befall him, Job is steadfast in his faith. Eventually all of his prior wealth and health are restored to him tenfold.

Lest I be unclear, Christ is not altering the message found in the Old Testament. God has offered his creation hope, salvation and love from the beginning. However, God’s message is about transforming the mindset and heart believers. It is not an easy lesson, and like any teacher trying to communicate a difficult subject, God broke the lesson down into small, digestible chunks. The lessons of the Old Testament are about establishing God’s preeminence over other gods and idols in the minds of humankind, and building a relationship with the children of Abraham in order to create a cadre of leaders who can then spread faith to the rest of the world. Like most student leaders, the children of Abraham got most of the message right. Unfortunately, in their desire to please God and spread the message correctly, the message about the mechanics of how to worship God and lead a faithful life became more important than learning how to BE faith filled.

Being faithful is NOT ONLY about actions. Being faithful is also about attitude and viewing creation differently than the rest of the world.

The life, sacrifice, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ are the embodiment of how to be faithful. God comes to us in the person of Jesus to lead by example. God has stopped telling us how to do be faithful. Instead God is SHOWING us how to be faithful. Being faithful is about leading by how, being generous to the point of sacrifice, loving unconditionally, and

forgiving without reason. We are to embody all of these traits in how we treat not only our fellow believers, but all of creation.

On our own, it is an impossibly difficult task.

We are incapable of doing it.

The good news is that God is great and overflowing with grace. God give us this grace to imitate Christ. In the Methodist tradition we call this type of grace Sanctifying grace. It is through God's sanctifying grace that we are able to emulate Christ and embody his sacrificial generosity.

So what is sacrificial generosity? Well, perhaps I should start by telling you what it is not?

Sacrificial generosity is not the kind of generosity or gift giving that the world lauds. Anthropologists study the exchange of gifts and favors in society, and they have found that generally gifts are given with an expectation of reciprocity, or tit for tat. I give your something, you give me something back. If you cannot give me something back, then you owe me. This expectation is found regardless of the type of gift, be it time, talent, food, money, or service. Every gift is carefully counted and weighed, and the exchange of gifts becomes a way of controlling and binding the members of society together. Those who have the greatest resources give the most and develop the most power and prestige within the group.

In the eyes of the world, gifts are not gifts, they are payments and chains.

Sacrificial generosity is based upon a willingness to give of self, possessions, time and talents without regard of self or expectation of reciprocity. Therefore, sacrificial generosity works differently from the worlds understanding of generosity in several different ways.

1) We are to offer gifts from the sources which are most precious to us instead of what is most convenient— our gifts are to be a sacrifice. It requires a willingness to move forward on faith without knowing where the future may lead. This kind of generosity assumes that one's needs will be met like the birds of the field are fed and the flowers clothed.

2) Sacrificial generosity is serial instead of reciprocal. Like the movie of the same name, sacrificial generosity requires that we “pay it forward”. We are not to worry about paying off the debt to the person who gave us a gift, instead, we are responsible for offering a sacrifice to someone else in need at a future time. The gift we offer will probably not be the same kind of gift we received; instead we will offer what it needed from those gifts and talents we have.

3) Just as importantly, sacrificial generosity teaches us how to accept the generosity of others with humility and grace. As Christians we learn that every gift, talent, ability and resource we have is given to us by the God. These gifts are ephemeral and can disappear with the loss of a job, a car accident, stroke or even age. The temporary nature of these gifts teaches us to appreciate them while they last and share them with others while we may.

This Christian view of gift giving AS sacrifice transforms us and frees us. We are no longer bound by the possessions of this world.

For the Christian, gift giving is freedom and empowerment.

What a radical departure from the world's understanding of power and generosity. We are free to give. We are free to receive. We are empowered to be grateful and humble. We are empowered to approach every aspect of our lives with the same kind of sacrificial generosity.

It is this radical departure from the world that leads Christians to make bold promises. When we join the United Methodist Church, we offer a simple oath. We promise to uphold the church through our prayers, presence, gifts and service. This promise is a formal affirmation of

our willingness to be sacrificial in our generosity. We boldly proclaim our desire to imitate Christ and the disciples by contributing to a common purse, by caring for the needy, by being present to each other in worship and fellowship, by lifting each other up in prayer and by offering our gifts in service to other individuals and to the church universal.

As we enter this period of studying stewardship, it is important to remember Christ's radical message of restoration, sacrifice and redemption which changes our understanding of generosity and our relationship with our fellow humans and the rest of creation. Like Christ did so many years ago, **WE** are to embody sacrificial generosity.

Yet they (and we) seem to forget one very important thing. Christ did not come to the world for the sake of power and prestige. Christ had a different task.