

You don't know what you are asking for

Mark 10:35-45

October 18, 2009

I'm going to begin today's sermon by giving you a pop quiz! Trustees can't take part because they've already taken the quiz. Actually, trustees can take part because they have already taken the quiz. The point is not to try to trip you up but to make sure you know the answers!

First question. Who's in charge? Who is the head of the church? Christ!

Second question. Who sets the direction for the church? Christ!

Next question. With whom should we consult when making important decisions about the church? Christ!

Last question. Whom do we represent when we act on behalf of the church in the world? Christ!

Christ forms us. Christ leads us. Christ holds us together. Christ sets the tone for the church. Christ sets the agenda for the church. We are the body of which Christ is the head. We are Christ's body in the world. This is who we are. This is what it means to be the church.

But we forget. We gather as the church in Christ's name, but when it comes time to get down to the business of the church, we do it the same way everybody else does it!

We seek same things -- success and growth and honor. We measure ourselves by the same values -- size and wealth and reputation. And we follow the same rules. We make motions and second motions and take votes, carefully following *Robert's Rules of Order* as the guide for all our deliberations. But who is Robert anyway and when did he replace the Spirit of Christ? Seriously!

Seriously! We need to look carefully at what we do and why. What do we seek? What do we value? What is our goal? What is our desire? Who sets the agenda? Who sets the tone?

These last several weeks, we have been reading stories from the gospel of Mark. Mark, like the other three gospels, is written for the church, probably for a particular church, not intended to serve as a guidebook for personal piety, but to provide a constitution for the church, a constitutive story for the church defined by who Jesus was, by what he said and did.

We have heard now three stories from Mark 10. The first story told of children being brought to Jesus for blessing. Jesus' disciples tried to turn them away, but Jesus welcomed them saying to his disciples: *Whoever does not receive the Kingdom of God like a child will never enter it.*

Last week, we read the story of the man who asked Jesus about the way to eternal life. Jesus told him to sell all he had and give the money to the poor. When the wealthy man walked away disappointed and downhearted, Jesus told his disciples: *How hard it will be for rich people to enter the Kingdom of God.*

And this week we heard the story of the two brothers seeking a place of honor at Jesus' side and the jealousy they aroused among their companions. Jesus advised his quarreling disciples: *If one of you wants to be great, you must be the servant of the rest; and if one of you wants to be first, you must be the slave of all.*

Whoever does not receive the Kingdom of God like a child will never enter it ... How hard it will be for rich people to enter the Kingdom of God ... If one of you wants to be great, you must be the servant of the rest ...

What is the gospel saying to the church? It's hard to miss! If the church is doing what everybody else is doing -- putting a premium on sophistication and wealth and reputation -- then it has lost its way! Our way is a different way. Our way is Christ's way.

Christ says: *Whoever does not receive the Kingdom of God like a child will never enter it.* How can a church receive the Kingdom of God like a child? Or, to put it the other way round, how may the church not embrace the Kingdom of God like a child?

When we are eager to prove how astute, how refined, how sophisticated we are? When we are anxious to show how different we are from those simple-minded believers who take the Bible at face value, who pray about the silliest little details of their lives, who sing praise songs with all their might? When we want our faith -- what we believe and how we live -- to seem most reasonable, most commendable in the eyes of our neighbors?

Hear again the words of the One who sets the tone: *Whoever does not receive the Kingdom of God in a wholly unsophisticated manner will never enter it!* Perhaps you remember what Karl Barth, the German theologian, said when he was asked to summarize what he had learned from a lifetime of study and writing: *Jesus loves me this I know, for the Bible tells me so ...*

Christ says: *How hard it will be for rich people to enter the Kingdom of God.* I'm not going to spend a lot of time with this story, because I discussed it at length in last last Sunday's sermon. I simply want to make the point again that the gospel intends to speak not just to individuals, but to churches. How hard it will be for rich churches to enter the Kingdom of heaven! Now that's quite the message to take to heart as we prepare to begin our fall stewardship campaign!

But take it to heart we must. Wealth must not get in the way. It is not our goal, not the measure of our success, not the means of providing our security. Money enables mission, but money must not get in the way of mission.

Christ's way is the way of freedom. Because I am not a slave to my money, I am freed to give what I have -- generously, liberally, without restraint. And because we are not slaves to our money, not beholden to our budget nor to our endowment, we are freed from anxiety about the future, freed to trust God to provide and to put what we do have to good use -- generously, liberally, without restraint.

Christ says: *If one of you wants to be great, you must be the servant of the rest; and if one of you wants to be first, you must be the slave of all.* That's the punch line to today's reading, Jesus' response to the jealous infighting among his disciples over seats of honor.

But let's ask the question again: What do Christ's words mean not just for you and me as solitary believers, but for the church of which we are a part? What honors do we seek? What status do we covet? What sort of reputation do we seek to promulgate?

If you want to be great, you must serve. Christ shifts the focus from how we want to be known to what we are doing, from honor to service, from reputation to mission.

So what is our goal? What do we seek? Do we want to be the biggest, the best? Or at least bigger, better? In whose eyes? To what end?

And when we talk about evangelism, when the wider church talks about evangelism, what are we talking about? I keep coming back to Jesus' way of doing evangelism, Jesus' way of proclaiming the gospel, a very different way! Jesus told the man honestly looking for the path to salvation: *Go, sell all you have and give the proceeds to the poor ...* And when the man walked away disheartened, because he was very rich, Jesus let him go.

For Jesus, evangelism is not about attracting warm bodies, but about announcing good news. And Jesus' message to that man was good news, because it would have set him free! He was a slave to his wealth. He could not let it go. He valued it more than anything else, more than everything else, even his life!

Evangelism is not about church growth. It's about faithful witness. It's not about inviting people in. It's about telling people good news. Let me share with you two quotations from a book I read this summer by Bryan Stone about the church and evangelism.

*What the gospel needs most is not intellectual brokers or cultural diplomats but rather saints who have taken up the way of the cross and in whose lives the gospel is visible, palpable, and true. It needs disciples who follow Jesus with or without the support of their culture and for whom the power of the gospel is demonstrated not through winning but through obedience ... (Bryan Stone, *Evangelism after Christendom*, p. 12)*

*Evangelism will have to be understood not as an adventure in "winning friends and influencing people" but as a fundamentally subversive activity, born out of a posture of eccentricity (living "off center" or "outside the center," at the margins) and out of the cultivation of such deviant practices as sharing bread with the poor, loving enemies, refusing violence, forgiving sins, and telling the truth ... (Bryan Stone, *Evangelism after Christendom*, p. 13)*

That's evangelism. That's how Jesus did evangelism: sharing bread with the poor, loving enemies, refusing violence, forgiving sins, telling the truth. The critical issue for our church is not how to get people in the door or how to get them to stay, but how we faithfully live out the gospel in a world that sets a high value on other aims: how we share with the poor around us, how we show love to our enemies, how we refuse to use violence as a way of solving problems, how we forgive those who sin against us, how we tell the truth.

We have no mandate from Jesus to grow. We have no mandate from Jesus to increase our numbers. We do have a mandate from Jesus to love our neighbors. We do have a mandate from Jesus to serve our neighbors.

We must ask ourselves these questions: What do we seek? What do we value? What are our goals as a church? What is our desire? These are questions we need to ask, but not questions we need to discuss! Christ is our head! Christ sets the tone! Christ sets the agenda! We don't need to hold a debate. We need to make a decision, a decision to take Christ's way or to go our own way.

Christ's way will be hard. It is a way that will often put us at odds with the rest of the world, with what most folks consider practical and reasonable and reputable behavior. It is a way that will often involve sacrifice and even suffering. But it is the way to life, both for us and for the world of neighbors we are called to love and serve.

Which way shall we go?