

What Do You Want?

Matthew 20:17-28

“What wilt thou?” That’s the King James way of saying, “What do you want?” Well, what do you want? I’m sure we would all give different answers, depending on our needs and our current situation. As we anticipate the end of our long season of COVID, some are ready for their careers to start anew, while others are looking forward to retirement. Some of us might want an increase in fitness, and others would just like to be able to get out of bed without pain.

What do you want? How we answer this question will also depend on who is asking us, right? I mean, if the carhop at the Sonic were to say, “What do you want?” you wouldn’t say that you need a loan so you can purchase a house, would you? And if Emma or Bobbie at the River Hills Bank were to ask how she could help you, you wouldn’t say you want a burger and fries, right? When asked what you want, your answer in large measure reflects what you expect to receive, what you think the person asking the question can do for you.

Okay, so what does the mother of the sons of Zebedee ask of Jesus? Given that she and her sons expected Jesus to be the next king of Israel, her request was perfectly logical. For why wouldn’t James and John want to sit in the places closest to Him, to have His ear, to be influential and powerful nobles at His court? And such power and influence is probably what the rest of the disciples wanted as well, given how displeased they were in verse 24 when they heard about James and John’s request.

And so even though Jesus was on His way to Jerusalem, he brings everything to a halt in verse 25 in order to set His disciples straight one more time. He tries once again to explain to them how power works in the Kingdom of God.

Now, it’s obvious what James and John and their mother thought about power. They believed that power involves sitting at the right hand of the man-in-charge, basking in his glory, doling out commands and favors, telling everyone else what to do, and then sitting back and watching them do it. That is, after all, the way most of the important, powerful people throughout the history of the world have behaved.

And that may even be the way some of us look at leadership – simply in terms of getting our way. Maybe we think that if we just had enough power or money – and in modern America, power is often expressed in terms of money – we could fix everyone and everything around us. Maybe we think that if we just had enough influence or leverage, everyone would come around to see things our way and do things our way, which is, after all, the only right way, right?

And of course it would have been very easy for Jesus to lead in the way we would like to lead, in the way that James and John thought was right. He is God, after all, so there’s really no one who could have stopped him. As Paul points out in Philippians chapter 2, Jesus could have clung to His rights as God. Jesus could have stayed up in Heaven, remaining at arm’s length from the problems of this world, expecting us to do the best we can with the blessings and the talents He has given us. On the other hand, He could have thundered commands at us and then blasted us with lightning bolts when we don’t understand or when we don’t obey.

But He didn’t do any of that, did He? Instead, He came down from Heaven and became one of us. Instead of pushing us around, He rolled up His sleeves and got busy about the tasks of teaching and preaching and feeding the poor, and even healing blind beggars, as we will see next week.

So, what does that mean for us? It shows us that leadership isn’t so much about bullying people or getting our way as it is about giving of ourselves. It’s not so much about giving orders as it is about pitching in. And that’s because, at the end of the day, leadership really isn’t about the leaders. No, when it comes right down to it, leaders lead for the sake of those who are led.

That means preaching is about the people. Teaching is about the students. Parenting is about the children. Medicine is about the patients. Retail is about the customers. Both Jesus’ teaching and His example show us that

none of us should be living for ourselves. Instead, all of us should be focused on meeting the needs of others. That, after all, is what love for our neighbors really means.

But there is another yet more sobering lesson in this passage, if we are willing to learn it. For if we learn that true Christian leadership is expressed in selfless service, we also learn that servant leadership necessarily involves suffering, in one way or another.

That seems to be the point Jesus is making in verse 22 as He asks His cryptic question to His two ambitious followers. He wants to know if James and John are willing to drink the cup that He drinks. And given their understanding of leadership, their answer to Him makes perfect sense. For they fully expected Jesus' cup to be the cup of victory. They fully expected Jesus to be anointed with oil like His ancestor David was – sitting on his throne in Jerusalem as King of Kings and Lord of Lords. So of course James and John were willing to drink from Jesus' cup because they expected that cup to be filled with glory and power.

And in one way, of course, they were right. Jesus did win the victory. Jesus did gain all authority in Heaven and on Earth. And James and John did indeed share in His glory – after all, we are still talking about them almost 2000 years after they lived.

But wait – how did Jesus win that victory? By humbling Himself to the point of death on a cross. And how did James and John come to share in His glory? By sharing His cup – the cup of suffering and death at the hands of their enemies.

And that's what Jesus was trying to tell all of His disciples in verses 18 and 19 – that He was going to Jerusalem not to be crowned but to be betrayed and condemned, not to be anointed but to be mocked and scourged and crucified.

And all that happened just as Jesus predicted that it would. For just a few weeks after the events of this passage, John would stand at the foot of the cross, and see the blood and the nails and the crown of thorns. That, Jesus said, that sort of suffering is the ultimate price of Christian leadership.

And that's the price that James ultimately paid. Acts chapter 12 records that King Herod put him to death with the sword because he would not deny the name of Christ. And that's the price that John ultimately paid, being sent into exile on the barren rock called Patmos, as he says in the first chapter of the Revelation, "for the word of God and for the testimony of Jesus Christ."

Oh yes, James and John drank from Jesus' cup. Because neither of them would deny the truth of Jesus' resurrection, both of them would suffer greatly to give us what we need. They would uphold and safeguard the truth of Christ and pass it on to us, even though their faithfulness cost them their very lives.

And in one way or another, that's the price all Christian leaders must pay. For if we would follow Jesus, if we would lead as He led, we should not be surprised if we also experience what He experienced. We should not be surprised to find that Christian leadership and suffering go hand in hand.

And that's true no matter what sort of leadership we are called to demonstrate. For how many good parents have shown Christ's love as they rock crying babies or as they wait up for their thoughtless teenagers to come home? How many teachers have shown Christ's humility and patience as they endure low pay and surly students and ungrateful parents? How many ministers and elders have suffered with Christ as they join in His struggle against sin and error, only to see problems and divisions increase in the Church?

So, how can we truly emulate Jesus' example of leadership? How can we truly become servant leaders? How can we endure the suffering that such leadership always entails? We can't, unless we share the motivation of Christ. We can't, unless we share His determination to stop at nothing in order to save the world. No, the only way to lead as He led is to demonstrate His unconditional love, His desire to be in relationship even with those who are clueless, those who continue to resist the claims of Christ, those who are bound and determined to go their own way.

For isn't that the kind of love Jesus displays in today's passage? After all, this is the third time Matthew records Jesus trying to explain to the disciples what would happen to Him in Jerusalem. He told them in chapter 16,

and He told them again in chapter 17. And He told them again in verses 18 and 19, holding nothing back, spelling out all the details of the way He would be beaten and whipped and crucified. But they never did listen. They never did understand what He was saying until after He had risen from the dead. Right up to the point of His arrest, they kept insisting on their own way. They kept their focus on worldly power and glory.

And I wonder how many of us are more like those disciples than we would care to admit. How many of us still look to worldly solutions in our times of most desperate need? In spite of our profession of faith in Christ, how many of us are really looking to money or power, to friends or family to solve our most serious problems?

Well, the good news is that no matter how self-centered those disciples may have been, no matter how blinded they were by worldly ambition, Jesus never gave up on them. He never sent them away. He never stopped trying to teach them. He never stopped loving them.

And that's the good news for us today. The good news is that James and John got it all wrong. For Jesus didn't come into this world for selfish reasons, to gain power and lord it over everyone else. Moreover, the good news is that Jesus didn't give Himself up only for people who were deserving of His love, for people who were basically good, for people who just need a little touching up around the edges – His disciples certainly weren't like that, and neither are any of us.

No, the good news is that Jesus came to save sinners, sinners like those ambitious, materialistic disciples, sinners like you and me. And He came to save us because He loves us selflessly, because He loves us unconditionally.

And it is on the cross that we see the greatest example of that love, don't we? It is on the cross that all of these lessons in leadership come together. For there Jesus served us, and there Jesus suffered for us precisely because Jesus' love for us was so great. It was there that we see most clearly how the Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve, by giving His life as a ransom for many.

That's the way Jesus led us and that's the way Jesus calls us to lead. That's the way Jesus has loved us, and that's the way Jesus calls us to love one another. Will we follow Him?