

What Do You Want?  
Matthew 20:17-28

“What would ye that I should do for you?” 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. Some, like our soon-to-be graduates are looking for a new start, and 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 doing the asking, right? I mean, you wouldn’t drive up to the Sonic, press the red button and ask for a loan so you can purchase a house, would you? And you wouldn’t walk up to Terry or Emma or Bobbie at the River Hills Bank and ask for a burger and fries, right? What you ask for in large measure reflects what you expect to receive. When someone asks you what you want, your answer in some sense gives an indication of what you think that person can do for you.

And so, what do James and John expect from Jesus? Given that they expect Jesus to be the king, their request is perfectly logical. They 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 41 when they heard about James and John’s request.

And so even though Jesus is on His way to Jerusalem, he brings everything to a halt 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 think about power. They believe that power involves sitting at the right hand of the man-in-charge, basking in his glory, doling out commands and favors in equal amounts, 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 people in the history of the world have wielded their power.

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 see things our way and do things our way, which is, after all, the only right way, right?

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 stop 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, thundering commands at us and then

blasting us with lightning bolts when we don't understand or when we don't obey. He could have remained 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.

But He didn't do that, did He? Instead, He came down from Heaven and became one of us. 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 pushing people around or getting our way as it is about giving of ourselves. It's not so much about direction as it is about involvement. 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, we lead for the sake of those we lead.

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. Jesus' example shows 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 38 as He asks His cryptic question to His two ambitious followers. He wants to know if they are willing to drink the cup that He drinks, and to be baptized with the same baptism He will experience.

And given their understanding of leadership, their answer to Him makes perfect sense. For they fully expect Jesus' cup to be the cup of victory. They fully expect Jesus to be anointed with oil like His ancestor David was – baptized with the baptism that would declare Him King of Kings and Lord of Lords. Of course James and John were willing to share Jesus' fate because they expected Him to receive 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. By sharing His baptism – the baptism of death at the hands of their enemies.

And that's what Jesus was trying to tell them would happen in verses 33 and 34 – 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 in 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." At the end of their lives, neither James nor John would deny the truth of Jesus' resurrection, and so both of them would suffer greatly to give us what we need, to preserve the truth and to pass it on to us.

And in one way or another, that's the price all of us must pay as well. For if we would follow Jesus, if we would lead as He led, we should not be surprised if we 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 offer. 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 must never forget His love, His desire to be in relationship with us no matter how great our sin. We must never forget His determination to stop at nothing in order to make us whole.

Of course we will see that sort of compassion so clearly in Jesus' encounter with blind Bartimaeus next week. But can't we also see His love in today's passage? You know, this is the third time Mark records Jesus as trying to explain to the disciples what would happen to Him. He kept telling them, 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 clueless those disciples were, 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 Jesus didn't give Himself up 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 in fact there isn't anyone like that, not really.

No, the good news is that James and John got it all wrong. Jesus didn't come into this world for selfish reasons, to gain power and lord it over everyone else. No, He came to save sinners, sinners like those ambitious apostles, 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 loved us, and that's the way Jesus calls us to love. Will we follow Him?