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## *What Do You Want Me to Do for You?*

**A sermon by the Rev. Canon George Maxwell**  
**Proper 24 – Year B**

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart find favor in your sight. Oh Lord, my strength and my redeemer. Amen.

“What do you want me to do for you?” You can almost hear the exasperation in Jesus’s voice when he poses this question to James and John. Here they are having gone through two full teaching cycles about the reversal, the lost and the last, how the last will become first and the first will become last. And yet what they want is to sit at his right hand and his left. Now these are the same two apostles who jumped out of the boat when Jesus called them, leaving their father Zebedee and the hired hands to follow Jesus. These are the same two apostles who were there on the mountain top at the transfiguration when Elijah and Moses appeared. These are the same two apostles who will be there in Gethsemane in Jesus’s final hour. And these are the same two apostles who will live out a life of discipleship and faith.

James being the first one to be murdered in Jerusalem about mid-century and John who tradition holds, wrote the fourth gospel and three letters, and maybe the book of revelation. These were apostles whose faith seems beyond question. So what are we to make of this moment, this request for power and status? We want to sit at your right hand and at your left. And by the way, they don’t seem to be alone. Notice how the other apostles are mad at them because they too wanted to sit at the right or the left. I think the way to understand this story is to hold it up against the next story that Mark will tell. The next story that Mark will tell is the healing of Bartimaeus, the blind beggar. And here again, Jesus asks the question, “What do you want me to do for you?” Except this time, the request is not for status, it’s for mercy.

This time blind Bartimaeus says, “I want to see.” And when Jesus calls him, he throws away his cloak and he is healed. Holding up these two stories helps us to see I think, that this moment for James and John is a moment of conversion. It’s a moment where their consciousness expands, where they too learn how to see. They have been exposed to Jesus. They must have sensed his power and wanted him to give some of it to them. All the while Jesus is trying to explain to them that they already have the power that they need. God is already present in their lives and in their hearts. They simply have to be open to it.

They are called to service, but not to earn God’s pleasure or privilege, but out of God’s pleasure or privilege. They will become servants not to find something, but to share what they have found. All of this Bartimaeus seems to understand when he throws away his cloak, the one way he had of having power, the cloak being the tool of the beggar to collect offerings from those who passed by. This, I think, is a moment of conversion. A moment when James and John are forced to see what Jesus has been saying all along. Jesus is serving out of his relationship with God. You too are called to serve out of your relationship with God. And that’s what that last line means.

Jesus is freeing us, not just from oppression, from those things that hold us back, from our disordered attachments, but for community, for the common good, for the beloved community, where there is no right and left, but maybe a table without assigned seating. This is the conversion, I think. Not that you aren’t supposed to exercise power or have ambition. Jesus has plenty of both. Instead, that you are to exercise that power and pursue that ambition for the common good. To participate in the beloved community.

Now, I’ve had my own moment of conversion this week. My wife’s uncle who was dear to her, fell sick early in the week and wasn’t expected to survive. So she went down to Mobile, Alabama, where the last 43 generations

of her family have lived. And she sat in the hospital as did her cousins, and aunts, and uncles, caring for each other while her uncle struggled. So as I began to make preparations to go down and join them, I was thinking about today, this moment. I've got to preach. And some of you know that when I prepare a sermon, I feel like I have to do a complete literature review of everything anybody has ever said about this particular passage.

And so, as I was trying to figure out how I was going to pack, what I was going to pack (i.e. move my entire library to the hospital in Mobile), I'm on the phone with my wife, Mary Hunter. And there is a silence and she says, quietly, "I don't want to appear self-serving, but maybe you should leave your books in Atlanta and just come here where something sacred is happening." The beginning of my conversion. So I left all of my things here and I got on the plane and I went there and I sat in that waiting room all week long through the highs and the lows, and I participated in the beloved community.

We were never without food. And if it was coffee to be made, the most powerful person in the room was easily willing to get up and do it. People were there for one reason only. They were there to serve, not to earn anything, not to gain anything, but out of their sense of belonging, out of their sense of family, out of a desire to serve the common good.

Things went as planned, which is to say not well over the course of the week, all of which was highlighted by a very successful surgery. It just proved not to be enough. And so we ended the week in the intensive care unit where what we all feared would happen happened. And at one moment, having gone and said the prayers that I was called there to say, I was walking back with some papers to portions of the family who had been gathered in the hallway. And I noticed a woman on the window sill by herself sobbing. Clearly she too had suffered a loss. And when I got back to the family, this beloved community that I was so privileged to be part of, my wife said, "Can I hold that paper for you?" And I said, "No, I know what it's for. And I need to talk to your aunt about it. And I will when she's ready." And my wife said, "I thought you might want me to hold that paper while you went and prayed with that woman."

Right. I gave her the paper and I walked over to this woman who was bent over in pain and grief and asked her if I could pray with her. She said, "Yes." And we gathered together in prayer for strength, for some sign of God's presence, in thanksgiving for her mother, who also had passed over. And as I was there with her in that moment, praying for her, of course, she was praying for me. That's just the way prayer works. And the presence of God was not something I needed to read about in a book. It was something I could participate in, in the moment, with a stranger who I had just met, not because I was trying to accomplish anything for her. Not that I was in control of the situation, but I wanted to share with her, all of that family that I had just inherited in the waiting room.

What do you want Jesus to do for you? Sometime this week in your prayers or in a serendipitous moment, you're going to hear this question. What do you want Jesus to do for you? And if you are like me, your answer is likely to look a little bit more like James and John than Bartimaeus. My experience would tell me to go with that, but keep asking the question, for what purpose? Whatever your answer is, ask the additional question: for what purpose? And this, I think, will lead you in your own conversion from answers that look a little more like James and John to answers that feel a lot like Bartimaeus.

It's not to give up power or to abandon ambition. Jesus had plenty of both. It's to learn how to use them freely, freedom from all the disordered attachments and oppressions of this world and freedom for the beloved community, which we glimpse from time to time, which I glimpsed in the waiting room with the family I inherited. And with this stranger who I will forever be joined. What do you want Jesus to do for you? I invite you to answer that question and ask yourself another, for what purpose? And may you too see what you did not see before. Amen.