

**The Rev. Christine Love Mendoza**  
**The Church of the Good Shepherd**  
**The Twenty First Sunday after Pentecost, October 20, 2024**  
**Job 38:1-7, 34-41 and Mark 10:35-45**

The disciples James and John approach Jesus and say, “Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you.” Whenever I read this verse, I hear a memory. This is probably a memory we all have – that of a child saying to the parent, *Promise me you won’t be mad if I tell you.... Promise me you will say yes... Promise me it will be ok...*

Whether this memory is of your children or from your own childhood, we have all heard or said something similar, haven’t we? The child wants upfront promises of safety and security before he asks for what he wants. She wants to hedge her bets and guarantee protection before confessing what has just happened. He wants assurances that the situation isn’t as uncertain and scary as it seems.

Unlike King Herod’s brash promise to his daughter Salome, I knew better than to make open-ended promises like these to my daughter before I knew more about the situation. You just never know what will follow these pleas of *promise me...* Quite likely it may be something that I cannot or do not want to give her. And I learned the hard way that breaking a promise to her creates far more trouble and heartache than just refusing this open-ended promise.

*Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you.* Recall that the disciples had just heard Jesus tell the man who had many possessions that he lacks only one thing if he desires to inherit eternal life –go and sell all that he owns and give it to the poor; then, return and follow him. This man went away grieving because he was not sure he could do that.

Jesus then shocked his disciples by telling them that it is easier for a camel to thread the eye of a needle than for someone who is wealthy to enter the kingdom of God. Jesus then **reiterated** the upside-down nature of God’s kingdom, where the first shall be last and the last shall be first. It is not so much the accumulation of riches that marks one’s blessing but what one does with them – how one puts these blessings to the service of others. Jesus teaches that the winners of this age will have to struggle mightily, for their attachments to the gifts of their success will be difficult to overcome. The rules of God’s kingdom are clearly different than the rules of the world, and none of the disciples know how to navigate this strange, new terrain.

And now Jesus and the disciples are again walking the long and dusty road to Jerusalem. Along the way, Jesus tells them for the third time what will happen there – that the Son of Man will be condemned, killed, and rise again. Tensions have been mounting and the disciples are feeling confused and stressed. With each footfall, they are one step closer to this great uncertainty, and I imagine them whispering amongst themselves: *if this is what is going to happen to the Messiah, what does that mean for us?* James and John, now clearly shaken and fearful, cannot take it anymore and they approach Jesus with their request: *Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you.*

It’s as if they are pleading: “Ok, ok! But promise us...promise us *something*. If following you here and now will result in losing everything, give us *some* assurances. Promise us that if we give up all power and security *now*, that we will be granted it in the kingdom. Promise us that we will be at your side when you sit in glory!” James and John are still trying to constrain and soften Jesus’ message of the kingdom of God. They are trying to tame the *wildness* of God and God’s will for us. They are trying to understand God’s kingdom with the same rules of retributive justice that we cling to so dearly in this world: that the good are rewarded and the bad are punished. It’s such a simple notion, isn’t it? And it helps us make sense of the world in a way we find manageable. Retributive justice helps us cling to the illusion that we have some semblance of control over God. The good are rewarded and the bad are punished. This belief allows us some certainty, some security. It allows us to keep God in a box of our size and understanding.

The story of Job, however, powerfully challenges this simple construct. Job, a good and just man who was faithful to God in all his ways, suffers unspeakable and undeserved afflictions and yet

maintains his fidelity to God. At times, Job cries out “why, God?” But each time he is met only with silence.

But now, finally, God responds to Job. Unfortunately, God doesn’t so much answer Job’s questions but instead poses new questions that reframe everything: “Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge? Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth... ? Have you commanded the morning since your days began and caused the dawn to know its place...? Can you bind the chains of the Pleiades, or loose the cords of Orion?” (38:2, 4a, 12, 31)

A less poetic way of saying this might be: “Who are you to presume you understand the whole picture; the whole of this age, this creation, and your place within it?” Our God and His justice do not neatly fall within the constraints of *our* understanding. God refuses fit in the box we offer him.

This lesson is powerful and true, but that doesn’t make it any easier to understand. The disciples have already left behind all that they had: their livelihood, their families, their possessions, and their dreams for the future. However meager these might have been in the grand scheme of things; their sacrifices have been real. And now, they want to know that they will be rewarded for them. *Promise us we will be at your side when you sit in glory!* Jesus tells them again that it doesn’t work that way in the kingdom – whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all.

It is not only the disciples who struggle with this – we do as well. Jesus’ teaching walks us along that fine line between self-interested sacrifice and selfless giving in love. To be sure there are many false martyrs in the world; those who appear to give and give without regard for self, but underneath that beatific sheen lies self-interested motives.

In contrast, Jesus calls us to live a different way, one of self-giving love for our God and our neighbor without regard for reward. As God’s faithful, we do not give only to gain; we do not surrender power now in order to rule over others later; we do not drink from the cup of sacrifice only to ensure deferred glory. We do not do these things now to guarantee a future reward. No, we do these things because that is *who* we are created to be.

Our creation story in Genesis tells us that that God created humans in His own image. Deep within each of us, we have been imprinted with God’s image. And we are summoned to bear this image in the world by being good stewards of God’s creation; serving each other without restraint; and loving and giving sacrificially and recklessly.

To live and give *sacrificially* is to live and give *sacramentally*. Fredrick Buechner defines sacrifice in a simple and powerful way: to sacrifice something is to make it holy by giving it away for love. By this understanding, then, when our gift is an unrestrained and unconditional offering of love, then that gift is made holy. That gift becomes a sacrament in that it is an outward and visible sign of an inward and invisible grace. It is in this way, that our gifts and service for others – our outpouring of self in love – become the agents of our transformation in Christ.

Samuel Wells, Anglican priest and ethicist, wrote a beautiful meditation on the gifts and grace of humility that’s speaks poignantly to Jesus’ call to us. In it, he writes, “Wash one another’s feet, be the servant and slave of all, make every act of your life a sacrament of love to others and praise to God. Your existence is a miracle, and your redemption is amazing grace.”

As Christians, we believe that God is the giver of all good gifts. And as a people who receive all that we have as gift from God, we bear God’s image best when we give it all away for love. And then, perhaps, when we walk this way in love, we will have no need for promises of reward.

Let us pray.

*Holy and gracious Father, give us the courage to live, love, and give sacrificially, so that by our gifts offered in love, **we** become a holy sacrament. Give us the fidelity to follow your Son Jesus Christ in all his ways so that we may be transformed into his likeness and bear your image more boldly in the world. All this we ask in the name of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.*