

SERMON: What Do You Want Me to Do for You?

TEXT: Matthew 20:17-34

Years ago, a woman in my congregation called me early on a Saturday morning to say that her husband had died in the night. I was stunned. The two of them had stopped by my office and taken me to lunch about three days before. She told me she had sensed for the past few weeks that something was wrong, but whenever she questioned him, he said he was fine. As people in the congregation learned of his passing, they offered to help. “Please tell her if there’s anything we can do....”

In the days following his death, as I was in conversation with the widow, I shared these expressions of compassion and care from her church family. Her answer to the question, “*How can we help?*” was that she needed \$5,000 to pay for his funeral. She told me that he had always taken care of their finances and told her not to worry about anything. Now she was discovering that she should have been worried, that things were not taken care of as he indicated.

As you might imagine, the people who offered assistance were thinking more along the lines of a bag of groceries or bringing a meal to the house. They were certainly not expecting to be asked to donate towards the funeral expenses.

Now, most of us are probably thinking that the widow misunderstood what church members really mean when we say, *“If there’s anything we can do....”* Social protocol dictates that her request was out of bounds. But in her time of shock and grief, she didn’t care about the rules of social protocol. She was angry, and argued that people should not offer to help if they’re not willing to help.

From the Gospel of Matthew, we heard that Jesus came upon two blind men sitting beside the road as he and his disciples were leaving Jericho. They heard that Jesus was passing by, so they began shouting, “Have mercy on us, Lord, Son of David!” The crowd tried to shush the men, but Jesus took notice. Matthew writes, “Jesus stood still and called them, saying, *What do you want me to do for you?*”

With all due respect to Jesus, I think this falls into the category of stupid questions. The men are blind; I think we can assume they want their sight restored. On the other hand, maybe Jesus isn’t close enough to notice that they are blind.

Matthew's words imply that Jesus had not yet approached them. *He stood still and called them.*

“Lord, let our eyes be opened,” is their request. Moved with compassion, Jesus touched their eyes. Immediately they regained their sight and followed him.

WHAT DO YOU WANT ME TO DO FOR YOU? I wonder if Jesus realized he was leaving himself wide open on this one. I mean, a person could interpret this as similar to finding a genie in a lamp and getting three wishes. A greedy or clever person might want to take advantage of this opportunity. “Hmmm. Let me think. I want a million dollars. No, wait. I want a perfect life, where nothing bad ever happens. No. How about world peace?”

Another story from Matthew that came right before the healing of the blind men, was the one when the mother of James and John came to Jesus and knelt before him. Here, Jesus doesn't imply that he intends to grant her a favor. He simply asks her, “What do you want?”

She answered, “Declare that these two sons of mine will sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your kingdom.” Now, I guess since this is a request from their mother, she can be excused for her misunderstanding of the mission and ministry of Jesus. She hasn’t been following Jesus around as her sons have these past couple of years. But James and John should understand by now that Jesus will rule in a very different way than all the rulers before him, and that there is no cushy, purple throne, no servants at his feet in his kingdom.

So, Jesus addresses his answer to her sons. “You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I am about to drink?” The cup Jesus is about to drink is death, but James and John do not hesitate to claim that they are able. They still don’t get it.

They think that Jesus is going to be powerful and famous, lifted up to rule over the people who will bow down to him. The disciples want a piece of that. Sometimes, we’re all guilty of wanting a piece of that.

Have you ever wished that you remembered your life as a baby? Or wished that you could go back to being a baby? What a great life! You get to take a nap

anytime you want. Anywhere you want. And people think it's adorable. You don't have to lift a finger for yourself. People will carry you around, hold you close, and keep you warm. They will feed you when you're hungry. They will do lots of silly things to make you smile or laugh. All your wants and needs are taken care of, and everybody wants to be your servant.

It's fine to expect servants when you're a baby. But once you're able to do things for yourself, you're on your own.

Jesus explains to the disciples the difference between God's kingdom and other kingdoms. "You know that the rules of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. It will not be so among you; but whoever wished to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be your slave."

On this earth, there is no throne for Jesus, where he will lounge in the lap of luxury, flanked by his second and third in command. In fact, before they know it, the disciples will experience Jesus kneeling before them to wash their feet. And later, he will be lifted up over them, not sitting on a throne, but dying on a cross.

WHAT DO YOU WANT ME TO DO FOR YOU? Jesus is not worried that we might ask for more than he's willing to give. Before we can even form the words of our request, Jesus has already given us the answer. He gives himself. Body and blood. Heart, soul, mind, and strength.

All of our prayers have already been answered in him. In his life. In his suffering and death. In his resurrection.

And right now, in these frightening and uncertain times, it is not the people in high places who will save us. It is the servants. Servants of all races and classes. Truck drivers and grocery store workers. Police officers, EMT's, and firefighters. Nurses, doctors, custodians, and all medical staff. Homeless shelter volunteers, food service workers, and nursing home staff. These are the servants who are doing all they can for us, without even having to ask the question, WHAT DO YOU WANT ME TO DO FOR YOU? They are putting themselves at risk to keep us safe.

It reminds me of an ideal that many people lived by a few decades ago. "Ask not what your country can do for you. Ask what you can do for your country."

May our eyes be opened to see where God is leading, to see the needs around us. May we be moved with compassion, as Jesus was, to heal others. May we follow his example, knowing that we are called not to be served, but to be servants of others. May we all participate in the healing of our world... to the glory of God!

AMEN.