



## SERMONS THAT WORK

### **Pentecost 22 – Proper 24 Year B**

#### **Change Your Question – Change Your Life**

**[RCL]: Job 38:1-7, (34-41); Psalm 104:1-9, 25, 37b; Hebrews 5:1-10; Mark 10:35-45**

Here they come: the Zebedee boys. In fact, you can see them coming. They've been shopping at Men's Warehouse, and they like how they look. They flash whitened smiles, they've got just enough grey around the temples to look experienced but not tired; enough tan to look sporty, not like they have to earn a living out of doors. They sidle up to Jesus. "Hey Jesus, can we speak with you in private, just for a moment?" They want to get him alone, out of earshot of the rest of the disciples, because they want something and they're smart enough to know the others might not appreciate the deal they want to cut with the Lord.

"We're close, right? Friends?" we can hear them saying. "We've had some special times together, you and us, right?" They don't beat around the bush as they jockey for favor from the Lord. They come right to the point. They are ambitious for the top spots. The Zebedee Brothers want to be co-CEOs of the new Church. They want the cushy corner office with the great view. Toss in a country club membership or, better still for two former fishermen, a mooring at the Galilee Yacht Club. They want the top cabinet posts in Jesus' administration. They want to give orders, not take them; ask the questions, not answer them.

If this caricature seems a bit caustic, then it captures the tone of the Gospel reading for today. But before we distance ourselves from the Zebedee boys too quickly, it's worth considering that the reason the church saved this little story of big embarrassment for the disciples is that Jesus knows we all have a little Zebedee in us.

Maybe we don't aim as high as they in wanting to be at Christ's right and left hand in his glory, but maybe we do share something of their approach to life.

There has been a lot written about mission statements as a way to guide us as we go through life, about how as groups or as individuals, we can use mission statements to help us set priorities, to keep focus on what really matters most to us.

I think there is also such a thing as a mission question—a mission question that sums up our approach to life. And just like a mission statement, a mission question can guide, for better or worse, how we live our

lives. When looking at James and John, we can surmise the question that guides their lives, that leads them into this embarrassing muscling-in on Jesus to ask for special status. Their mission question is, “What’s in it for me?”

Today’s scene is not just embarrassing, it’s heartbreaking, because we’ve seen how James and John left their fishing business and their father to follow Jesus. We’ve seen that they have sacrificed a lot to continue with Jesus down this road of discipleship. But today we see that ugly question, rearing its self-centered head: *what’s in it for me?*

Now James and John are on the right track in that they do have faith in Jesus’ victory. Even though Jesus has been saying all these strange things, like “the first shall be last and the last first,” and “become like a child,” and “those who are great must be servants,” they have faith that Jesus is actually a good leader, a man with great potential for power. Even though, like the rest of the disciples, they often don’t get what he’s saying, they think he’s the one to back, he’s the candidate who is going to come out on top. They think, even though some of his teachings are pretty upside-down and idealistic, Jesus will be glorified, and they want to be there when it happens, on his right and on his left. They’re willing to follow Jesus because they want to back a winner. And if Jesus is a winner, then maybe some of his prestige and power will trickle down to them. They’re approaching discipleship from this angle: *what’s in it for me?*

The sons of Zebedee don’t realize Jesus’ talk about service as a way of life, of the abundance that comes from being emptied out, of the security that comes from loosening your grasp on things and power and allowing yourself instead to be grasped by God, is not merely a means to an end. They don’t realize the irony, that if you can give up that question – *what’s in it for me?* – and instead serve, you will have an abundant, worthwhile, meaningful life. By giving up the question, *what’s in it for me?*, you’ll get more than you ever dreamed.

Jesus teaches and serves and lives and dies and is raised again for this truth: serving others is powerful. Giving up yourself for another, being emptied out in love is abundant life. But to find your way to these rewards, you have to stop asking the question, *What’s in it for me?*

*What’s in it for me?* It’s the question that turns friendships sour when you realize that someone seems only to take and never to give. It’s the question that reveals itself when in the midst of a project the going gets rough, the rewards seem far away, and the thanks even farther, and people originally onboard drift away. When the answer to the question, *what’s in it for me?*, seems to be less and less clear, so does their commitment. It’s the question that reveals itself when people come to any church as consumers, not worshippers, not servants, looking only for what we can get out of it, not what we might put in, not what God might get out of it through our efforts to be attentive and present in prayer and praise, for just a little while once a week. *What’s in it for me?* It’s a human question, one that we all ask at some time or another.

Even in our Gospel lesson, the sons of Zebedee are not alone. When the other disciples hear that James and John have put themselves above their peers, they run up to Jesus too. They’re angry. They’re mad. And

not because they see that James and John have misunderstood. They're mad because they didn't think of it first. They're angry because they think of power the way the world thinks of power – as something that's yours if you take it, if you're the strongest, swiftest, most politically savvy, most well-connected. They think there's only so much to go around, and those sneaky little Zebedee brothers have gone ahead and grabbed the power first.

But Jesus doesn't give up on his disciples. Jesus sees beyond all of this. Maybe he could see them as they would become, filled with the Holy Spirit after Pentecost, transformed into courageous witnesses whose dreams of greatness, whose *what's in it for me?* attitude had been replaced by the humble goal of serving the Lord they love. Perhaps he could see that someday they would stop asking, *what's in it for me?* and start asking the other question in today's Gospel, Jesus' question: What is it you want me to do for you?

At first glance, we may imagine Jesus asking this question in frustration. He asks it, after all, just after the Zebedee boys have come up to him and demanded that he say yes, even before they tell him what their demand is: "What is it you want me to do for you?" But this is the question Jesus always asks. Not to step on the toes of next week's sermon, but we'll hear Jesus ask it again in next week's gospel when he'll ask a blind beggar, "What is it you want me to do for you?" And the man will ask for healing. This is Jesus' question for all who come to him. This is Jesus' open, vulnerable mission question – a question that guides his life of service, of his willingness to meet us where we are, to allow us the freedom to tell him what we really want. This means sometimes that Jesus hears requests like James' and John's – requests that sound more like a child's immature grasping – gimme, gimme, gimme. And sometimes, Jesus hears the honest response of those who know that Jesus is our only hope: requests for healing, forgiveness, a second or third or fourth chance, a chance to try again, a chance to come before Jesus empty-handed and say, "Lord have mercy, Lord, let me know your grace and love."

A task for those who would follow Jesus is to allow Jesus to transform our questions so that we are people who ask not, "*What's in it for me?*" but, "Jesus, what is it you want me to do for you?" And be brave enough to listen for Jesus' answer and open to receive its rewards.

When your question is, "What can I do for you?", when you concentrate mainly on what you can put into church in the way of personal work and prayer and participation, you feel that you receive even more than you give. You find that service can be challenging, but it also brings deep joy. Service can be demanding, but it also brings pleasure and contentment and hope.

Jesus comes to us and asks, "What is it you want me to do for you?" May Jesus heal and transform us so that we might ask the same of him and be brave enough to listen to the answer. Amen.

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Published by the Office of Communication of The Episcopal Church, 815 Second Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10017

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