

## PASTORAL PRAYER

On this Sunday, this day of resurrection and renewal, we greet you, O Lord. Our hearts and souls are open to receiving your power and love so that our lives may be transformed into more faithful discipleship. Let us enter this time of prayer open to receiving your goodness, and may we leave it ready to partake in the mission of disciple-making, for ourselves and for those all around us. Holy One, receive the prayers on our minds and hearts that we may be transformed by the sharing, transformed into those freed from the weight of burden and ready to be healing forces ourselves. Hear the wounds of our hearts and of the world, aching for your healing touch. Hear our prayers, loving God.

Gracious God, you are a God of Grace and a God of Challenge. Sometimes, God, we long for one far more than the other. For the idol that is grace without responsibility, we repent. For the false gospel that is freedom without accountability, we turn away. May we find you in the place where we can grow into more faithful followers, more committed disciples, that see you not as the source of all we want, but the source of growth and empowerment to follow. We pray all these things in the name of the Lord who provides and the Lord who sends, Jesus the Christ, who taught us to pray as one...

## SERMON

There's an old phrase that has become cliché: "Be careful what you wish for. You may get it." What sounds good in the moment doesn't always work out in the long run. I have this uncle named Kurt who was the bane of holidays like Christmas or Thanksgiving whenever we visited my grandparents in Bellevue, Nebraska. When I was small, say, 5 or so, I was afraid of holidays because Uncle Kurt would be there, and he would give me his patented "Shaver Shots," also known as the noogie. He'd grab me over the neck and rub

down my head until you cried for mercy. I was powerless. I was small and unable to fight back. Well, when you were that young, it hurt, and I just couldn't wait until I would be old enough to give Uncle Kurt a shaver shot. Well, I grew up, but as I did, Uncle Kurt got married, had kids, and couldn't come as regularly to my grandparents for holidays. After all, he had to be with his new family as well. We started only seeing him every other Christmas, and now, I don't even see him at Christmas anymore. I wished so hard that I could be big enough to fight back at Uncle Kurt, but my wish was granted, at the expense of Uncle Kurt's presence. I got what I wanted, but in the long run, I was worse off. The connection with Uncle Kurt and family is hard to keep with the long distance and rare opportunities to see them. Be careful for what you wish for. You may get it.

Those foolish disciples...they're at it again. One day, James and John, brothers and the sons of Zebedee, come up to the Lord Jesus Christ, present at the creation of the Universe and say to him bluntly..."Teacher, we want you to do whatever we ask of you." Yep, they said it: "Teacher, we want you to do whatever we ask of you." Listen up, Jesus, because your disciples really want something. I wonder how Jesus looked at that moment. He knows them better than they know themselves. He probably knows exactly what they want and where they're going, but he bites. He turns to them and says, "What is it that you want me to do for you?" They respond, "Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory." Small thing they ask of him. Only the most royal place in all of creation after God, especially the right side. That's where the most important people sit in that time, according to the New Interpreter's Commentary.

Let's be honest, we're a lot more like the disciples than we'd care to admit. We're good at asking God for things. Prayer often is the request to God, asking for things we think

are faithful, and we are all subject to it. “God, if I can get this promotion, then I will be in a better position to serve you.” Or, in my case, the honest prayer is “God, if I can only finish this ordination paperwork, then, wow, I will feel so much more freed to do your service.” Heck, I remember one of my first prayers as a young child was to find a toy I lost. Such selfless prayers, they seem, but they also have a real self-serving edge to them. I’ve prayed that prayer so many times without realizing it. The words may be different but the prayer is the same. “God, give me...” “God, help me...” “God, let me...” And what is the point behind it? “Because I want it.” In our worst moments, we make God to be the dispenser of blessing, handing it out because we want it.

So, Jesus responds. The answer is no simple “yes” or “no.” It is not “I will do it for you” or “I cannot do that.” It is “You do not know what you are asking.” How could they not know what they’re asking? When you are seated in your glory, let us be there with you. When there’s a parade in your honor, let us be by your side. When you have triumphed, let us partake in your celebration. After all, it’s their due; they’ve stood by Jesus in this ministry, done the hard work, and deserve the rewards.

But Jesus knows there is a different meaning to their question. Jesus isn’t thinking about the throne in heaven or the crowds of worshipping saints when he returns to God. He’s not thinking about all the goodness he will receive for his faithfulness to the calling of God, even in his weakest moments. He’s recognizing what it will take to reside in his glory, and it ain’t pretty at all. When he resides in his glory, there will be nails in his hands. When he resides in his glory, there will be a spear in his side. When he resides in his glory, it will be torture. There will be a crown of thorns on his head, and there will be a parade not celebrating him but mocking him as the so-called “King of the Jews.” They don’t know that,

so it makes no sense what he's trying to say. They are asking for the glory but not the work, the requirements that come with it. They are asking for all the fun without any of the work. Jesus says that it just doesn't work that way.

Power is not what it seems. Celebration is not what it seems. To sit with Christ in his glory isn't what it really seems. The King of the Universe came to be scorned, to die, to live and die in infamy. And yet, it is so human to sit before God and pray the same prayer that these disciples raised. "God, I want you to do whatever I ask of you." It is so human, but so is the way that we view God in those moments. Paraphrasing Miroslav Volf, the problem is not whether we are accepting God or rejecting God. That's too easy; that's not the real issue. The real issue is the subtle danger of making God a secondary part of our lives, making God the one who is there when we need something, or making God that vending machine of blessing, ready to pop out when we throw in a prayer.

Jesus answers a different way. "Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?" In other words, "are you sure that you want what you're asking for?" There is an obvious miscommunication going on here. It's all the wishing with none of the requirements. These disciples are all-in with the rewards, and Jesus is all in with the work it takes to get there. It works for anything in life; it works for anything in the church. As anyone can tell you on the Board of Trustees, a healthy building requires a lot of work. You don't just sit back and wait for results. The results come when you put in the appropriate time and work to get there. It may shock you, but to produce a sermon each week takes hours and hours. It's not just the time to sit down and compose it; there's a lot of time thinking about the scripture passage and the topic at hand. There's prayer, there's research, there's checking out various materials. There's a lot of time that

goes on behind the scenes before I can even get up here to preach it. It'd be great if I could just stand here and tell you the perfect theology of each passage. But it isn't. It takes hours of work each week just to stand here and deliver a message.

It also takes a lot of work throughout life. Sometimes you think you have it all down; sometimes you realize it takes a little work and maturing to get there. When I got to college in 2004, I started in Hastings' Christian Ministry program. I was an eager young boy knowing he felt the call to ministry and thought he really knew more than he did. It was a new thing; my group of six newcomers was only the second class to enter this program, and I did so with enthusiasm. I knew I was among my peers, so I went into our first meeting with gusto and confidence, ready to show them how much I knew about the Bible and the Christian life. I wanted them to see that I belonged, that I was ready to be one of them and maybe even lead them forward. And then I got there. We started off by reading a scripture passage, the Sermon on the Mount, and I quickly realized that I was in over my head. I started listening to my colleagues and how they read this passage, the ways they understood it and took it apart, and it put me in my place. I heard one person speak, and I thought, "Well, I hadn't thought about it that way," "That's new," or "Oh, I'll remember that." I was, in name, reputation, and now, mentality a rookie, and I needed to be a rookie. Sure, I had the talent to grow in knowledge and wisdom, but boy, I wasn't there yet. It didn't take a big speech or reproof to put me in my place. Being among the talent I was showed me that I was not yet ready to take on the responsibility I thought I personally was ready for. I wanted to be a leader in the group, I had to get there by my accomplishments, not my self-determined worth.

And that's where Jesus ends up. Power is not seized; power is earned by being the servant among equals. In Christian circles, we are continually talking about servant leadership, the leadership that does not pride one's own self or one's own accomplishments but seeks to lift up all those around them in order to foster true leadership. And it begins with this passage. "You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them." In other words, power is seized among them; power is used as a bat, as a tool to get what one wants him or her self. But with us, it is different. "But it is not so among you; but who ever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all." And if that wasn't enough, Jesus lays down the ultimate example: For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many." If it's God's way, it is called to be our way, and that way is not easy but always worthwhile.

This is the calling to faithful discipleship. It's a prayer that has four words that's more important to live than to say: "Thy will be done." It's a belief that requires a lifestyle, a mentality, a challenge. Following God requires work to get to the end of the road for God's glory and not always what we want. There's something so comforting about standing before God at the end of the journey and hearing, "Well done, good and faithful servant." But, until we get there, there's the literal cross we need to bear, the obligation of the discipleship path. We can ask for blessing, but we also can't lay aside the commitment that goes with it.

Be careful what you wish for, for you may get it. If you want to be strong, you must be the weakest. If we want that seat of power, then our mentality is probably more about

us than God. Sitting beside the Messiah and Lord of all, we must be willing to walk that path of sorrows to get there with God's ends in mind. After all, the footsteps of Jesus aren't easy, nor were they for his disciples. After 2000 plus years, the message...hasn't changed. Thanks be to God for the challenge and the worthwhile nature of the Gospel path! Amen and amen.