

What Do You Want Me to Do for You?

This sermon was preached by Rebecca DeBow on October 25, 2009

*“ ‘What do you want me to do for you?’ Jesus asked him.
The blind man said, ‘Rabbi, I want to see.’” - Mark 10:51*

I read a story about a woman named Alice who promised to bake a cake for her church bake sale. She made an angel food cake, but when she took it out of the oven, the center caved in. She didn't have time to bake another one, so she searched her house for something to build up the center of her cake. She found what she needed in the bathroom—a roll of toilet paper. She stuck it in, iced it up and the finished product looked great.

Alice gave her daughter some money and instructed her to be at the bake sale the moment it started, so she could buy the toilet paper cake. But when her daughter got to the sale, the church ladies said the cake had been sold. Alice was mortified, but there was nothing she could do about it. She thought, “Thank God, my name was not on that cake.”

The next day, Alice went to a friend's home to play bridge. After the game, a delicious lunch was served, and to top it off, the cake, was *the* cake. Alice started out of her chair to warn her hostess. But before she could say a word, another lady exclaimed, “What a beautiful cake! Where did you get it?” Her hostess replied, “Thank you. I baked it myself.” [I read this several years ago in commentary called *Synthesis*, www.synthesispub.com.]

I tell you this charming story as background for today's gospel reading. The woman who baked the cake and the woman who served it look ridiculous because they want so badly to look good. Sometimes Jesus' disciples have that problem. It's easy to make fun of the disciples. Somebody said they remind him of the three stooges. The Three Stooges are always dressing up and pretending to be somebody powerful, like a professor or a king.

It's easy to make fun of the disciples, until I remember who else they remind me of. I want to look good too. In today's story, Bartimaeus doesn't care how he looks. He wants to see.

This section of Mark's gospel begins with the healing of a blind man in Bethsaida and ends with the healing of a blind man, Bartimaeus, outside Jericho. In between we learn a lot about the disciples who fail again and again to see who Jesus really is.

Peter rebukes Jesus because he just can't picture the Messiah humiliated and put to death. Jesus tells Peter to go where followers belong: Get behind me, Satan, he says. Then Jesus teaches that if they want to be his followers they must deny themselves, take up their cross and follow him.

James and John tell Jesus they want something from him. He responds, “What do you want me to do for you?” They want to sit on his right and left hand when he comes into his glory. Jesus says, “You don't know what you're asking.” They don't know about the cross.

A few verses later, Jesus says he will be betrayed, killed and the third day rise again. They don't understand what he's saying and they are afraid to ask him about it.

Instead, they begin arguing about who among them is the greatest. They're not interested in suffering. They want greatness, the way humans understand greatness.

Jesus asks what they're arguing about and they won't tell him. He sits down, which means he's going to teach, calls the twelve, and says, "Whoever wants to be first must be last and the servant of all." He doesn't tell his disciples it's wrong to want greatness. He tells them about true greatness, about being last, about being a servant.

I read about an interview of Leonard Bernstein, the great conductor. Someone asked him, "What's the most difficult instrument to play?" Bernstein said, "Second fiddle. I can get plenty of people to play first violin, but to find a musician to play second violin with enthusiasm is problem." If no one plays the second part, there's no harmony and the music is diminished. Most of us aren't thinking about the music. We're thinking about being first.

Most of us don't want to be servants either. At the end of my parents' life, a woman named Wendy took care of them. Every day she went to the nursing home to feed my mother her lunch. She cooked for my dad, helped him bathe and take his medicine. She was their servant, the way Jesus came to serve.

When Jesus says we're to be last, we're to be servants, it helps to remember how much he loves us. We're worth everything to him. Right after he says that about being last and a servant, he puts a child in the midst of the disciples and says whoever welcomes one of these little ones welcomes me. Mark says he put his arms around the child. Another time he says the kingdom belongs to such as these.

In Jesus' day, his time and culture, children as a whole aren't highly regarded. An individual child might be loveable, if the child is yours, but children in general aren't worth much until they're adults and contribute something useful. But Jesus doesn't treat children that way.

I read about a couple who approached a famous man. Their small child happened to be with them. The famous man stooped down, shook hands and said hello to the child, who was pleasantly surprised, and said to his parents, "He thinks I'm people."

That's how Jesus thinks of us, as real people, as persons of worth and dignity. When my mother and father couldn't walk any more, or care for themselves, Jesus cherished them just as much as when they were working and raising a family. I know we're worth everything to Jesus because he gave up everything to save us. If anyone had a right to be ambitious, to think of himself as great, it was Jesus.

I come to church and worship God, read the Bible with folks like you, and pray because even though I seem to understand something about Jesus, it's very hard to for me to be anything like him.

Yesterday I came to church to find some quiet to finish this sermon. I was interrupted by the telephone repairman who needed all kinds of help. I won't bore you with the details. At one point we were wandering through this massive building trying to find George, the sexton, when I heaved this long, loud sigh. I guess I wanted that telephone repair man to know I was doing him a big favor because I was very busy and important and I was trying to get the Lord's work done. I felt embarrassed and then I remembered we didn't have to search for George. George carries a phone. All I had to do was call him and he would come to us. I was too busy and important to think of that.

Why do I worry about looking good, about being important? Why do I want others to notice how hard I work? When you affirm me, I feel delight. That's just human

nature and there's nothing wrong with that. But one day all my accomplishments and all your praise will fade away. And the only thing that will matter is God's love for me. In the meantime, I've noticed, resting in the love of Jesus Christ strengthens me like nothing else. I count on you to help me remember that.

My New Testament professor likes to talk about how often Jesus is interrupted. He's on his way to preach when a leper stops him and asks for healing. Jesus heals him and tells him to be quiet about it. But the one he healed tells everybody and after that Jesus can't go into a town openly, but has to hide out in the country.

Jesus asks his disciples to come away to a deserted place to rest. But his rest is interrupted because crowds find him and he has compassion on them because they're like a sheep without a shepherd, so he teaches them. His teaching is interrupted by the crowd's hunger, so he feeds them.

Bartimaeus interrupts Jesus. And Jesus asks him a gracious question: What do you want me to do for you? The same question he asked James and John. You remember what they wanted—glory, importance, power, greatness. Bartimaeus wants something else. He wants to see again. He just wants to see.

When Jesus tells him his faith has made him well, he regains his sight, and follows Jesus on the way. Mark tells us where they're going—to Jerusalem and the cross.

Let Jesus ask that question again. What do you want me to do for you? What would I ask for? This morning, I'm here with you and you give me courage. I hope I would ask, Lord, give me eyes to see you, and strength, to follow you.

Please pray with me:

Tender God, who embraces us with love.

Through the ages you have told us, "Fear not."

Whisper it again in our ears.

Write it on our hearts.

Amen.

[This prayer was sent to a friend who was in the hospital. I don't know who wrote it.]