A Sermon for DaySpring

By Eric Howell

*“The Drum Major Instinct”*

Mark 10:35-45

October 21, 2018

The disciples’ ill-fated attempt to position themselves in glory and Jesus’ call for servanthood are before us today. James and John get a lesson in humility from Jesus and anger the other disciples. For 2000 years we’ve been wagging our finger at their hubris as an example of what not to do. Yet I have to admit a begrudging tip of the cap to James and John who have the courage to ask Jesus for glory. Audacious boldness of this sort is a character trait I don’t think I possess, at least not when it comes to prayer. But these guys . . .these two . . .they have no filter.

James and John come to Jesus, just the two of them, with a request that reads more like a demand. At least it is information shared honestly: “Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you.” It may deserve the lifetime award for Achievement in Honest Human Communication. Whether we’re speaking with God or speaking with one another, this unspoken desire rests at the root of the tree: I want you to do whatever I ask of you.

Whatever else you say about it, that’s quite a bold approach to prayer. “Lord, I want you to do whatever I ask of you.” At least it’s honest. Truly, isn’t that the unspoken preface to every prayer, every request we ever make of God: I want what I want.

That’s true, isn’t it? Be honest with yourself. For all the compromises we make with others and realization that this dream is rarely a reality in real life, what would make everything much simpler is if, in every circumstance, you would just do whatever I ask of you.

Parents, we all sigh together now; you know this struggle. Parenthood is a training ground for figuring out how to get a little someone just to do whatever I ask, when I ask it. You new parents, oh, you think you’re going to be different. But you’re not. You’ll know you’re not the day you hear yourself, like the words are coming from somewhere else, but they’re not, they’re coming from no one but you, when you say those words, “Because I said so.”

We desire control, in situations and relationships when we rightly should have it, and in situations and relationships when it’s a little more dubious. The honest prayer of a human is for my will to be done on earth as I want it to be done in heaven. We secretly desire omnipotence, in which we are only servants of our own desires. I want everyone to do whatever I ask of them when I ask it in the way I ask it. It’s self-idolatry: we fashion a god in our own image and that god is us.

Maybe that is overly harsh judgment on two disciples who approached Jesus with a simple question. The point isn’t to condemn them, but to recognize the common humanity we share with those two. They are us. The other ten disciples, when they heard about this little plan, were indignant at James and John, not because they had the chutzpah to pose to Jesus such a request, but because they didn’t get there first. They are us. We’re all in this same boat. We’re wired this way.

A baby cries when she feels her tummy empty or her diaper full. Her mom comes to comfort the baby not only to stop the crying, but to discover what the baby is trying to communicate: an empty tummy, a full diaper, a sore tooth, cold toes? The baby doesn’t even know she’s crying out a message she’ll repeat all through her life: I want you to do whatever I ask of you, I just don’t know how to ask yet. But they learn.

Babies grow up a little and learn if they keep crying after being put to bed, mom or dad will come to visit. This can go on for months, years even. The little scientist has tested his first hypothesis. If I cry, they will come running. And give me what I want. It’s a natural survival instinct, but there’s a dark side. Unless somehow we learn otherwise, the lesson is reinforced all through our lives; other people exist to give me what I want. The earth exists to give me what I want to consume; I only have one thing that controls me, that is my desire.

Freud said that everything we hoped for was derived from a desire for sex. Alfred Adler came along and said, no it’s not that as much as it is a desire for power. We desire superiority. Calvin said humans are a factory of idols, each one giving witness to our innately disordered relationship with our wants.

What happens spiritually is that God becomes another means to the end of getting what we want. It could be sex or power for some people; for many people it’s simply desire for desire’s sake. That’s the nefarious character of disordered desire. When you get what you think you want it doesn’t bring satisfaction; it opens the door to more desire you didn’t even know you had. Desire begats simply desire. Our whole economy relies on this simple, universal human truth. People who have something will want something more. When they get it, they will want something still more. Rich Mullins said it well, “Everyone says they want just one thing; what they mean is they want one thing more.”

Still, as much as we might want to join the other ten disciples in being angry at James and John, I admire their boldness in just coming out to ask -- give us what we want. Most of us are so much more skilled at hiding our selfish desires, sophisticated in covering them up, expert in hiding them even from ourselves; we’re really good at being subtle about what we want is What.We.Want.

A man doesn’t walk up to a woman and say what he really wants. He’s much smoother. Instead he asks, “Is your daddy in prison? Because he stole the stars from the sky and put them in your eyes.”

Or he says, “Is your name Google? Because you have everything I’ve been searching for.”

Or, “You must be made of cheese, because you’re looking gouda tonight.

Maybe the disciples should have tried that on Jesus, a little smooth talking. Hey Jesus, we were just talking about what a great Messiah you are. You’re the best. You’re glorious, and we don’t care what people say about you, we think you’re the best. If I could rearrange the alphabet I’d put U and I together Forever. Anyhoo, while we’re on the subject, we couldn’t help but overhear a while back when you called Peter “Satan” and all. That guy . . .can you believe him? They’ll never name a church for that guy, amiright?

Anyhoo, if that means there’s a spot open at the top, the two of us, we’re here for you. One on your left, one on your right. We’re there for you. All the way. What do you say, the three amigos, riding to glory?

Maybe if they’d worked the angles a little with Jesus, they might have gotten him into going along with their plans, but probably not. He was on to them from the beginning. He knew what those two were like, what all the disciples were like, what people were like, what they are like still.

Martin Luther King considered this story and named the truth about humans on display in James and John. It’s the drum major instinct, he said, that’s at work. It’s that thing inside of us that makes us want to be out front, in the spotlight, leading the charge. Because we want the glory. We like to do something good and be praised for it. Nobody is unhappy when they are being praised, even if they didn’t deserve it, unless someone else is getting praised more. The drum major instinct, King said, explains why some people join a lot of things. They want to be recognized and honored.

I received an email the other day that promised a nationally famous speaker would like to speak at our church sometime this year. “Your church appears to be a perfect church for him to come visit.” Well, well, I thought, overlooking the obvious form-letter quality of the message. “It’s about time we got the recognition we deserve. I shall click on this and read more.” You can imagine my delight to see that the message was from a Las Vegas Combat Chaplaincy ministry known as Fight Church. The speaker is a hulking former UFC hall of famer and WWF star.

Of course, I thought, reading this, they’ve done their homework. If I know DaySpring at all, we are indeed the perfectly obvious church to host a nationally famous speaker! Like Galadriel in the presence of the One Ring, I was flush with the possibility of the glory to come our way.

I started writing a new hymn:

If your fists can pummel, come away.

If you like to wrestle, box, or MMA,

Come away with me, to a place where you can bring

Your violence and anger, tap out if you surrender

Your life to Jesus after 10 rounds in the ring.

I’m just glad someone else could see it too. I’m imagining a whole new use for the gaga ball pit.

The drum major instinct makes us desire recognition wherever we can get it. King said this is in everything about us humans. It’s why we buy houses and cars we can’t afford. Dave Ramsey drives it home when he says, “We buy things we don’t need with money we don’t have to impress people we don’t like.”

“The quest for recognition, the drive for distinction, the hidden desire for our specialness to be more special than anyone else’s specialness.” (Michael Coffey). That’s what James and John did. But in attempting to separate themselves from everyone else, they actually identified themselves with what we all hold in common: We’re not gods, but we’d sure like to be.

You don’t know what you’re asking, Jesus replies. You’re like the blind man only partially healed. You can see, but you don’t understand what you’re seeing. You can hear, but your ears are stopped. You can follow to Jerusalem, but you still don’t understand, even after all this time, where this road is heading.

When you congratulate yourselves more on who you are than who I am, you don’t know what you’re asking. When you more concerned with your self-protection than with selfless service, you don’t know what you’re asking. When you’re content with the race to the top, and don’t see that the messianic journey is heading the other way, you don’t know what you’re asking.

You want to be first. You want to be great. You want to be honored. I see that in you.

You want that? Then become a servant. Let the tyrants of the world bully and rage and strive for glory. This is not your way. Let the rulers of the world have their illusions of god-like dominion. This is not your path.

Jesus doesn’t admonish the disciples for asking for greatness. This is surprising. One might expect him to lay into them. Instead, he reorders this human desire in the way of servanthood and gives us all a new definition of greatness. The first shall be last. The last shall be first. This is the Christian way. There is no other.

Whoever would be great among you must be your servant and whoever would be first among you must be servant of all. Even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.

Ransom us our Savior from ourselves and our need for control and recognition, and our rush to make a golden image of our desires and fall down before them in submission.

Set us free from slavery to our wants. We are shackled to them hand and foot, red in tooth and claw. Set us free from what we want that we may be servants of what you want for us and from us.

Yes, let us excel in humility.

Let us shine in service.

Let our desires be reformed into the spirit and heart of Jesus.

Let our trophy be the cross of Christ.

Copyright by Eric Howell, 2018