

The Wrong Question

I have spend a large portion of my life being a student or an instructor—twelve years of early education until high school graduation; 4 years of undergraduate work at Chapel Hill followed by 5 years of post graduate work at Duke before I began doing medical research. While at Duke I began teaching bacteriology in dental and medical school labs. When I left Duke for Minnesota it was only a few years before I began teaching residents in the laboratory where I was doing research for the chief of medicine. So that added up to about 25 years. Although I taught some Sunday School during the next period of my life I was away from a formal classroom setting. It wasn't until I began seminary training in 2007 and spent the next 5 years in a classroom that I realized some things don't change. You probably remember being told this same thing by a teacher or multiple teachers at some point—"There's no such thing as a stupid question." In general, I agree with that. But it seems to me that our gospel passage today is about asking the wrong question. The church year works on a different cycle than the calendar year, but at this point there is a slight overlap. The church year will end in about 5 weeks with the beginning of Advent while the calendar year will continue for another month. Yet our readings from the gospels at this point are approaching the endpoint of Jesus' ministry. For the last several passages, Jesus has begun explaining to his disciples who he is and what that means. Almost from the first moment when Peter responded to Jesus' question about his identity, Jesus has been telling them that they only have it half right. Yes, he is the Messiah. Yes, he is God's anointed who has come to redeem the world. But no, it isn't going to be like you think it will be. Jesus has explained to them that he has to reverse the expectations of the world and replace them with the reign of God where the last shall be first. He tells them that in this life there will be persecutions and they will be called upon to be servants of all. Jesus then tells them for the third time what will happen when they reach the end of this journey to Jerusalem. It is in this context that James and John, the sons of Zebedee come to Jesus and ask him for a favor. They say, "Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you." And Jesus says to them, "What is it you want me to do for you?" Unlike the Gospel of John with its asides indicating Jesus already knows what is going to be asked, this conversation seems like a straight forward leading question by James and John followed by a reasonable response from Jesus. Jesus asks them what it is that they want. And they tell him—"Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory." These two disciples are among the closest to Jesus—they are in the inner circle—and it seems that they want to secure this same position in the future. We hear a great deal about upward mobility and this seems to be something on these disciples' minds as well. Today upward mobility seems to be the desired goal of all those who are not at the very peak of society's image of success. Being on the top rung of the ladder is the aim. People speak of the existence of glass ceilings which interfere with their upward rise. Others speak of what needs to be done within our society to give those who are oppressed or disadvantaged by the current structure of things access to that upward movement. The focus in our culture is on moving upward no matter our current station in life if there is some position or something which we perceive as being better or greater than what we have. As a culture we tend to prize being at the top. Knowing that about ourselves and the world we live in, do we then identify with James and John in their request given in this passage?

Really in a sense it is not surprising that they approach Jesus with this petition. They have a desire to be recognized and rewarded. We usually just focus on how dense they seem to us as they fail to understand the message Jesus is giving them about this path to the redemption of the world is going to proceed. He has been telling them that their expectations about power and glory are all wrong. His message is about giving—not getting—and they don't seem to get the message. His message is that as his followers they are also to be giving—not receiving. But these men have made a commitment to him—leaving their source of livelihood behind with their father and the nets to follow when Jesus called them. They have given up their way of life to wander the Galilean countryside with Jesus. They have seen him provide healing and nourishment to others. Now in the face of this uncertainty—they still have confidence that there will be a time when Jesus will sit in glory—and they seek assurances that they are going to get something in return for signing onto this journey Jesus is making. They want to collect on their discipleship. Their request is initially vague—they want Jesus to do whatever they ask. In many ways that resembles our approach in prayer—we ask for Jesus to do for us whatever it is that we feel we need. Jesus answers their request with a question of his own—he wants them to define just exactly what it is that they wish him to do for them. When they give the parameters of what they desire—to sit at Jesus' right and left hand—the traditional seats of power and influence—it seems that they have upward mobility in mind. Jesus' lack of a positive response must have disappointed them. And considering the context of their request—it was the wrong question for them to have asked. Between the passage of last week about the young man leaving because of his attachment to his possession and this request by two disciples Jesus has again given a graphic description of what is coming when they arrive in Jerusalem. “The Son of Man will be handed over to the chief priests and scribes, and they will condemn him to death; then they will hand him over to the Gentiles; they will mock him, and spit upon him, and flog him, and kill him and after three days he will rise again.” It is significant that this is the third time that Jesus has told them that this is the fate of the Messiah. From the perspective of those now reading the story, it need only have been given once; but the threefold nature of the pronouncement is a way of asserting the reliability and the inevitability of what is to come. The location of these pronouncements also lends them weight. The first time Jesus tells the disciples what is to come is just after Peter has made the declaration that Jesus is the Messiah. It constitutes a redefinition of the term Messiah. Peter is so rattled by this revelation that he rebukes Jesus for saying. Peter is envisioning Israel's redemption coming through strength not the apparent vulnerability of dying on a cross. The second time Jesus brings up this subject they are returning to Capernaum and the first response of the disciples is to debate their own greatness among themselves. Jesus takes them to task and tells them that being the last is the mark of greatness among his followers. He then embraces a child explaining that greatness comes from receiving and welcoming the vulnerable who are not valued by society. This request given by James and John shows that like the young man who went away they have an attachment to something—not possessions, but recognition, status, power. They still have not grasped what Jesus is telling them about his identity and how it will be fulfilled, about the mission of redemption he is fulfilling—they misunderstand his mission, his character and what being his disciple requires of them. Evidently, James and John have made this request of Jesus privately—out of the hearing of the other ten. Near the end of this text we find that the other disciples are not happy when they hear what James and John have requested of Jesus. This

disagreement causes Jesus to gather them all together and again give them the message that discipleship in his reign is about giving, not getting. It is not organized like the rest of the world. “So Jesus called them together and said to them, ‘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.’” The reference to Gentiles allows us to place this comparison in the past as we no longer use that term to refer to non-Jews. But the meaning of the observation Jesus makes does not sound like it applies just to ancient times; in fact, it sounds fairly contemporary. In Jesus’ context, it was the aristocratic land barons or the Roman overlords who made the rules, and of course any rules they made were for their own benefit. These days we have members of our world who are in power and exert that power for their own benefit and to the detriment of others. That seems to be the way of the world no matter what terms or titles are used to name the rich and powerful. But Jesus tells his disciples there is another way: “But it is not so among you; but whoever wished to become great among you must be the slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve and to give his life a ransom for many.” This is at the core of what Jesus’ Messiah-ship was and is about. It is a way of living that runs contrary to our natural tendency to think about power, leadership and all of life in the terms which the world presents to us as reality. We live in a world that agrees that the observation Jesus made about the Gentiles is not only correct, but is right. But Jesus proposes that we find greatness in our willingness to serve others—to give of ourselves. This view of giving up the desire to place ourselves above others and to instead serve each other is about how to have a healthy community life. When we buy into the world’s view of how things should be, we become dissatisfied with what we have. We begin to believe that the only way to achieve happiness is to get a bigger share of the pie and that the pie is a limited quantity. This becomes a recipe for hostility and frustration and anger toward others. If instead, we trust in God’s view that there is enough, if we concentrate on our relationships with those around us; if we see ourselves linked and interconnected to other people—to all other people, if we view the world as having the possibility for abundance for all, then we may be less likely to ask the wrong questions. Maybe our request will be ones which will make the Lord rejoice in us. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.