

Sermon for July 25th. Based on Mark 10:35-45

“What do you want me to do for you?”

Carl Thomas

James and John ask Jesus to do for them whatever they are about to ask. His reply is, “What do you want me to do for you?” And then there follows one more example in Mark’s Gospel that the whole ministry of Jesus, up to this point in the story (at least) is not understood at all by most of the people in Mark’s story, and pointedly, here, by two of his own disciples.

In Mark’s writings a picture of the disciples as kind of thick-headed, even oafish, runs through the entire gospel. Jesus even gets impatient with them on occasion. I used to put that down to a peculiarity of Mark’s presentation; it hadn’t really occurred to me that he was trying to make a point to his readers, the ones he’s trying to convince that following Jesus is the only way to go. Mark wants to make it clear that there are two operating responses to Jesus; one is “following.” knowing full well what doing so entails, and the other one is rejection of following. Simple to grasp. Somewhere in between those two positions, Mark places the disciples... They *want* to follow, they *do* give up their professions and go with him, but they don’t really know why, and are seemingly unaware that following is demanding and dangerous.

Hold that for a minute.

We need to ask *ourselves* about this. We need to pose, seriously, whether *we* know what following entails, and whether, upon knowing, we would be willing to do it. Because knowing, faces us with the reality of a thoroughly demanding life that takes no time off, except for the refreshment of being alone with God once in a while - again, like *Jesus* lived his life.

Are *we* ready for that kind of choice? Are we even convinced that the choice is that much of a change? I’ve been haunted by that myself. I’ve tried to kid myself..... somewhat in *this* fashion: why can’t I just try to live a good life,

act kindly towards others and let it go at that? The answer lies, of course, in reading about Jesus' lifestyle, obviously. When Jesus asks us to follow, or, for that matter, when God begins to make us aware of a "calling" (you can term this any way you want; it's the same) ...and when we read how Jesus actually lived, we're hit immediately with how hard it is to do. It's a life of service, not a life lived merely kindly, service that may demand almost more than we think we can handle. It's a vast, all consuming, threatening road. And for Jesus, it even meant his death. Who *would* want it?

Last week we saw that the rich young ruler certainly didn't. He understood exactly what was required, and when Jesus asked him to follow, he sadly declined; he simply couldn't manage it. [He is to be pitied, I think, because he *did* get what Jesus was requiring]. And I think we do too, when we're really, seriously looking at the issue.

A life of service- a complete life of service? Answer your call? Follow Jesus? Let me give you an example of how that works out for someone, I talked with a man just this past week who is coming to regard his *teaching* career as his calling. This is *his* following Jesus [he didn't put it that way, I'm doing that—but, again, I think it's the same thing].

He has hard times, he has sleepless nights; he agonizes over the plight of many of his students. Involvement with them has prompted his loving response, pain when they mess up, exasperation over how to help them, not always knowing just how to care for them, how to lead them. Yet he's totally committed to the enterprise.

Here's another: there's a woman I met last year who has taken her legal career into this intensity of involvement as well. She sees that she can do for clients what other ministers cannot, and she feels called to do it. It's already cost her plenty, but she does it anyway; this is *her* answer to the "Follow me" of Jesus lifestyle.

Ok, let's push this further.

What would happen if a politician felt called where he/she is?

What would happen if a policeman did?

What would happen if a businessman answered *his* call?

There are answers to all of those questions and you and I know them because we know life stories of people in those walks of life who have made a difference with their service to others, often at great cost to themselves. There are lots of examples

What would happen if *we, you and I*, felt called of God, called of Jesus to follow? For many, some of whom are in this room, the question has become rather, what *has* happened? Because they *have* answered with their whole being and life, and invested *everything* in the response?

Well, is it all a drudge? Aren't there joys in it? Of course, lots of them. Is there also a lot of pain, pain one wouldn't experience if one declined the offer? Of course, again. Jesus answered his call, and because he did so, he provides a supremely faithful model for answering with one's whole life...and then he asks us to follow him by doing the same, and then providing a model for yet many others to follow as well. Jesus does this every time we hear him say, "Follow me."

What's more we can read story after story of people who answered calls like Jesus issues, calls like God makes us aware of. These are stories in the Old Testament and the New; Isaiah, David, Moses, Amos come to mind. But we're also aware, as a warning, that not one of the stories is pretty, not...one of them. Fulfilling? Yes. Joyful occasionally? [We've already answered that one].

There's one other possible response it seems to me. We can hear the call to follow, we can understand it thoroughly, and then unlike with the honesty of the rich, young ruler, *our* response can be dishonest. We can *pretend* to follow; we can try to fool others by talking a good line, but, in reality, continue to look out for number one. There are those who take *that* route too.

This Christian discipleship business is not for the faint-hearted, is it? This Jesus we try to know, try to understand and support, this Jesus is far from meek isn't he? He calls; God calls. It's Service they're presenting. And there are millions of God's children out there who need that from us, service like that which Jesus is living out in Mark's gospel. And *we* can provide it; we can live a life of service like that, and not just some of the time, but *all* of the time. [Back to our story].

James and John come to Jesus asking for a favor, a privileged position. And their request reveals a complete misunderstanding of what Jesus was doing and trying to get them to do as well. In other words, as we've noted already, they don't get it. Neither do the other ten who become indignant when they hear about this conversation a little later, not because of the audacity of the request but probably because they didn't think of it first and feel like someone, someone they trusted, has just slipped into line ahead of them.

Nevertheless, they all continue to go with their leader to Jerusalem, walk towards certain destruction of Jesus, and possibly also themselves. They don't know why they're doing this; they don't understand the calling. Jesus once again tries to teach them about it, but Mark nowhere records a breakthrough. The tragedy moves steadily forward.

And Mark is showing us this entire saga in order to gain *our* agreement to follow, even if the disciples really did not do so; Mark is displaying to us a story so that we will learn a sure grasp of what's involved in following Jesus in our own place and time, even if the disciples missed the mark over and over in *their* place and time.

“What do you want me to do for you?” Jesus asks James and John, asks us (in the way that Mark sets up the story of Jesus' life).

We need to be very careful, very aware of how we're responding when we answer that question. When we form a reply, is there willingness inherent in it to follow Jesus? Is there a “yes” to a call of God when we respond?