

**Proper 24B (20th Sunday after Pentecost)
(The 10th Anniversary of the Dedication of the Church)
Job 38:1-7, 34-41; Psalm 104: 1-9, 25, 37b; Hebrews 5:1-10; Mark 10:35-45**

October 18, 2009

A lot of people have been making requests of Jesus. (We do this all the time, ourselves; we call it “prayer.”)

Many have come asking for healing.

After he healed a demoniac, some people begged him to leave their country.

Scribes and Pharisees have asked him trick questions, hoping to trap him or trip him up in front of the crowds.

A rich young man just asked him how to go about inheriting eternal life.

His disciples have asked for clarification after hearing his parables—though they have been too afraid to ask him to explain his disturbing words about being rejected and killed, or what he’s talking about when he says he will rise again from the dead.

Now James and John have a request.

Not asking to be healed.

Not trying to trick or trap him.

Not asking for explanations or the way into eternal life. They’ve seen and heard enough that they think they have a pretty good idea about that, and of what Jesus is about.

What are they asking him for? Well, EVERYTHING: “Teacher, we wish that you would do for us whatever we may ask of you.”

Sounds a little arrogant. . . really arrogant, actually, and self-seeking. That’s the way we usually *hear* the text. I am hearing it differently, though. I have been struck by the childlike nature of James’ and John’s question, and have begun to suspect that they’ve begun to catch the spirit of receiving the kingdom like a child, bold and utterly trusting, all at the same time. (*Cf.*, 10:15) Maybe James and John are making a wide-open request, because they are becoming wide open to new and dazzling possibilities they see present in Jesus.

It was Jesus’ response that made me wonder about their question. He doesn’t seem offended by their question; doesn’t come back at them with sharp, scolding words. He knows how to do that; we’ve heard him do it more than once. But he just asks the brothers to be a little more specific: “What is it you wish me to do for you?” With a smile, maybe; affectionate, curious. What are they going to ask for?

“To sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory.”

Wow! Where did they come up with that?!

James and John have seen his glory, you know, and recently. He took them with him up the mountain, along with Peter; there he was “transfigured before them, and his clothes became dazzling white” Then came a voice, “This is my Son, the Beloved, listen to him!” (9:2-3,7)

They were terrified, of course. (9:6) But, since then, they must have been mulling it over—how could they not?—talking together about that vision of Jesus in his glory, unveiled, and affirmed.

Now they are asking to be part of that. Whenever, wherever, however that will be, they want to be right there with him. Not following behind him. Not sitting at his feet. Not watching from the back of the crowd. Not keeping him at a safe and comfortable distance so they can get on with their own lives. Right up front, by his side, in the middle of it all, identified with him, and honored by him.

Wow! James and John have been called ambitious, and this does sound unabashedly ambitious! *Ambition: earnest desire for achievement, or fame.* (Webster's Collegiate Dictionary, Random House, NY, NY, 1991)

Ambition in itself is not necessarily a bad thing, though we all could cite examples of ambition run amok, in politics, the world of finance, the workplace, families, even in the Church. But without some ambition, we might not get out of bed in the morning.

On this day in particular—the 10th anniversary of the consecration and dedication of the new church—it occurs to me that if the leaders and people of the small Redeemer congregation in a small church building on this site had not had an earnest desire, wide open trust in God, a great deal of ambition—*chutzpah*, even—some years ago, we would not be worshiping in this glorious space this morning! The same could be said about the pipe organ, the beautiful gardens, and the columbarium now under construction. We have been ambitious here, earnestly desiring and doing amazing things, for the glory of God and for the sake of God's people.

And not only building projects; we are ambitious in ministry, also. Ambitious in desire to build up the Body of Christ in ministry with children and youth; the music program; adult formation; outreach to help bring about reconciliation and reduce hunger half way around the world, in Burundi. To name only a few things.

Whether ambition is a good thing or a bad thing depends a great deal on what we're ambitious for, and for whose sake.

Back to the brothers' question to Jesus. As Jesus once advised some dinner guests in the Gospel acc. to Luke, wouldn't it be more seemly to take a seat at the low end of the table, and hope to be invited up higher by the host? (14:7-11) To be more humble before him, and wait to be singled out?

The introvert in me whispers, *how do they have the nerve to expose themselves this way, to be seen as so filled with desire to be part of who he is and what he is doing! To come right out and ask!* My introverted self is diving under the pew right about now. What if Jesus says, "No"? How mortifying! (See, there is a dose of pride, sometimes, under our humility.)

Then, another voice chimes in, *how could you not want to be there, that close, and that identified with him?*

Still, even Jesus seems a little surprised by the brothers' request. But not angry, not offended. More concerned for them than anything else; more like, *Oh, boys, you don't know what you're asking. Be careful what you wish for. If you're not ready to be all the way in, what do you want?*

The image that comes to mind is Golgotha, where he will be crucified, and with him "two bandits, one on his right and one on his left." (15:27) Of course, those two weren't James and John. But you see the image: one at his right hand and one at his left. To be there is to have drunk his cup of suffering; to have been baptized with his baptism, into death. . . . And to have been raised with him into new life.

And Jesus does *not* say "No" to James and John. *The cup, you will drink; the baptism you will undergo. But to sit on my right and on my left is not mine to give. It is for those for whom it has been prepared.*

Could sound like a rebuff—*those places are not for you; they have somebody else's name on them.* Or, it could be an invitation. Surely *it is* an invitation, and a broad one, wide open as our desire for God and God's desire for us.

As the Apostle Paul wrote, drawing on the prophet Isaiah:

"What no eye has seen, nor ear heard,
nor the human heart conceived,
what God has prepared for those who love him . . ."
(1 Corinthians 2:9; *see* Isaiah 64:4)

And as on All Saints' Day, we echo Paul's words, when we pray:
. . . that we may come to those ineffable joys that you have prepared for those who truly love you
. . . . (BCP 245)

The places up front with Jesus, that close to him, on his right and on his left, are not, could never be, limited to a couple of ambitious brothers who were first to ask, or locked in for whoever called "dibs" on them first. There's room in those places of honor for everybody and anybody who loves him.

The politics and social structure of God are as different from our human structures as the economy of God, which David described last Sunday, as "an ordering of a hospitable household." There's no need to jockey for position, no need to become indignant about James and John. "It is not so among you," Jesus said to calm the ten. In the politics and society of Jesus it's okay to be ambitious, in loving God, in loving and serving all the children of God. To sit next to Jesus is not something to be achieved. It is not about fame. All it takes is desire, to throw in your lot with him, entirely, to give up your life.

Alice and Geoff come today with a great ambition for their child, Charlotte Grace Rose: an earnest desire for Charlotte to receive the Sacrament of Baptism. Their deepest desires for Charlotte's well-being and joy in life are intimately connected with her baptism.

With Charlotte's godparents Peter and Amy, Alice and Geoff promise today to bring her up in the Christian faith and life, as part of the household of God, into which we receive her today. A community with the same great ambitions for Charlotte as for ourselves: ambitious in love, rather than jealousy; in forgiveness, rather than resentment; in compassion, rather than competitiveness; in serving, rather than being served. A community looking forward to being seated right up front beside Jesus, in his glory, along with everybody else who has ever loved him, and everybody who ever will.