

1) The requests people make can sometimes tell you a lot about where they're coming from.

- *Can YOU fix this stupid computer?*
- *Could you spare me a couple of bucks?*
- *How do you get YOUR kids to do their homework?*
- *Would you consider marrying me?*

And the responses we make to requests like these say something about where WE'RE coming from. No request ever gives you the whole life history of whoever is asking.

And no response ever says everything about who we are.

Still, in requests and responses like these there's often plenty to get a conversation going.

2) Cases in point—what we've been hearing in the Gospel of Mark for three weeks running:

- From disciples James and John: *Jesus, will you do for us whatever we ask?*
- From a man—rich but restless: *Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?*
- From Bartimaeus, a blind beggar: *Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!*

Jesus doesn't give an instant response to any of them.

His FIRST response to these questioners is a question of His own.

A question that seems calculated to kick start a conversation:

- To James and John, He asks: *What DO you want me to do for you?*
- To the rich man, who wants to take it with him: *Why call me good? What says the Law?*
- To the blind man—oddly—the same question he puts to James and John:  
*What do you want ME to do for YOU?*

Jesus might not be totally clear about where James and John are coming from.

But He can hardly be in the dark about where the blind man is coming from.

*(DUH! Jesus! What kind of "mercy" do you SUPPOSE he wants?)*

Yet in each instance, by putting the urgent request on hold,

Jesus gets a conversation going, then draws it in a different, deeper direction.

That's also true in the opening response of dead silence that God makes, as Job cries:

*Where ARE you, God? Why do these horrors happen to me? Why won't you ANSWER me?*

In all these interchanges, the petitioners LACK something that they REALLY want.

The first response they get, in each case, seems seriously off-putting.

But perhaps these put offs are meant to help them

get beneath the entreaty on their lips to the longing in their hearts.

Maybe they don't know themselves, really, until they face hard "knowing questions."

Sometimes, in making our requests, we need to hear our own follow-up responses to those who are trying to help us sort out where we're really coming from.

Theologian Karl Barth has a great line: *When we put questions to God, says Barth, God's response is often—WRONG QUESTION.*

Just because we're asking doesn't mean what we're asking for is what we need.

- 3) Do James and John want control? Probably. But the deeper question is, why are they afraid? Does the rich man want to live forever? Sure—if his money bags go with him. Does Bartimaeus want his sight restored? Obviously. But when Jesus sees him throw off his cloak (his only possession)— When Jesus hears him say “My Teacher,” though the two have never met before— When Jesus takes time to engage the plea of Bartimaeus; it turns out that what Bartimaeus most deeply yearns for—and what he receives— is not just sight, but in-sight—that for which other disciples of Teacher Jesus have no eyes. Does Job want to know why he’s suffered such losses, when he’s done everything right? Sure he does, just like we do, when suffering persists, and the moral order of the world gets turned upside down. The “answer” Job finally gets—a barrage of questions that God puts to HIM; the answer Job gets is not one that I would find instantly heart-warming—namely: *Hey, Job, what do YOU know about making a world?* Still, it turns out that Job isn’t as interested in an ANSWER to his request, as he is in a CONNECTION with the One who, in a seeming NON-answer, takes Job seriously—a response Job does NOT take as a put down. The translation of Job’s response we heard today: *I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes*—that translation is seriously misleading. Here’s a better take on what Job says after God’s cosmic fireworks display— a display that is God’s response to Job’s request for God to show up: Seeing God’s cosmic splendor, Job murmurs: *Now I can be quiet—comforted that I am dust.*
- 4) To recapitulate: neither James nor John, nor Job—neither the rich man nor the blind man— None of these get what they ask for. Instead they get what they most need to hear—namely: who they are in the image of the God who called them into BEING— a God Who calls them from whom THEY think they are into whom they can BECOME.
- 5) The ending of the Job story seems like a “happily ever after” that doesn’t fit. What Job gains back is no compensation for his losses. Nor is it a reward for good behavior under tragic circumstances. (To say nothing of enduring explanations of his suffering from his friends that are insufferable.) The poet who penned Job is saying that bad things happen, and good things happen. That the former aren’t punishments, and the latter aren’t bonuses. Rather, righteous behavior has value just because it is righteous behavior—full stop. And trust in God NEED not, CANNOT be either built upon or gauged by fortune, good or ill. That’s a message not unrelated to what Jesus tries to get across to the rich man. *No, fella! Eternal life is not a guaranteed portfolio inheritance policy. Eternal life is following me in the way of the cross.* And THAT, not coincidentally, is the in-sight Bartimaeus is looking for, and what he gains, along with the restoration of his vision.

What does HE do, that neither the rich man, nor James and John see their way clear to do?  
Bartimaeus follows Jesus on the Way.

Not the way of secure resources, high status, or controlling interest.

But the way of the One who *came not to be served, but to serve.*

*and to give his life as a ransom—a liberation gift—for many.*

It is no coincidence that early Christians became known as People of the Way.

6) One thing is clear about these request-makers—they are all attempting to get their bearings.

James, John, and the rich man, it turns out, seek directions on a road to nowhere.

Job and Bartimaeus, on the other hand, search for a deeper connection

with One whom they can follow on the road to hell and back.

Job and Bartimaeus both get a response involving more than they envisioned—

The Way of the Cross which is the Way of Life and Peace.

7) Journeys of request and response—

reflecting on them—as an individual before God, as a member of this parish at this time,

as a citizen of this nation on the day after yet another burst of hate-filled carnage—

these are questions I am left to ponder:

- What requests am I make of God?
- What questions do I keep pressing?
- What if God's first response is: WRONG QUESTION?
- What kind of conversation might God be trying to get up and running with?
- How might God be trying to catapult that conversation  
into a whole new dimension—self-effacing but soul-redeeming?