



A Need to Get and a Need to Give

A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Ledlie I. Laughlin

The Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost ~ October 18, 2009

Mark 10:35-45

James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came forward to him and said to him, 'Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you.' And he said to them, 'What is it you want me to do for you?' And they said to him, 'Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory.' But Jesus said to them, 'You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?' They replied, 'We are able.' Then Jesus said to them, 'The cup that I drink you will drink; and with the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized; but to sit at my right hand or at my left is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared.'

When the ten heard this, they began to be angry with James and John. So Jesus called them 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. But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be 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.'

A woman who lived alone in a trailer in poverty and rode the bus to spend her days cleaning other people's houses and raising other people's children, dies – and in her will leaves the million and a half dollars that she had squirreled away – to a local school for troubled children. A young, freshly-minted, law school graduate turns down the offer from a prestigious firm and returns to the inner-city barrio where he grew up, and where his grandmother still lives, there to create a new kind of school. And a successful executive, well-positioned for the next corporate take-over, decides at age 47, to change careers, and work instead for a local not-for-profit earning a mere fraction of her former salary.

We know these stories. We know these people. How do we measure success? Where are we trying to get to? What are we seeking to achieve? Said Jesus (John 10:10), "I have come that you may have life, and have it in abundance." Yes. But what does that mean, or look like? "Abundance" defined how?

James and John, sons of Zebedee, reveal one perspective: that abundant life in Christ shall bring benefits of prestige, power, recognition. "Grant us to sit, one at your left and one at your right," they ask. When the other disciples show their indignation with James and John's pushy-ness, they reveal that they share their colleague's view; they're just annoyed they didn't think to ask first. Presuming that Jesus' victory shall be one of worldly and political domination, any one close to him would be a fool not to ask for a cabinet position; this exchange takes place mere days before Jesus' final confrontation with the powers of the Temple and of Rome. As we know, Jesus' victory was not as James and John envisioned. Rather, his victory was predicated upon self-sacrifice. To share in Jesus' baptism and to drink the cup that Jesus drinks is to pursue a path of victory that is defined not as worldly power but as sacrifice for others.

I read of a well-dressed European woman traveling on safari in Africa. The group stopped briefly at a hospital for lepers. The heat was intense, the flies buzzing. She noticed a nurse bending down in the dirt, tending to the terrible sores of a leper. With disdain the woman remarked, "Why, I wouldn't do that for all the money in the

world!" The nurse quietly replied, "Neither would I." Why are we doing what we are doing? What reward are you striving for? If not for all the money in the world, then....? Or, to point the way forward, how do we measure a generous heart?

I find myself acutely aware of living between two polarities: I am propelled by my need to get, and I am propelled by my need to give. I do not think the one is bad and the other good, but I am aware that each awakens a different sensitivity within me. I am not talking simply about needing stuff; I am talking about acquiring and achieving. Like you, I've put a lot of energy into getting where I am, and work hard so that you and others will appreciate who I am and what I do, and will reward me accordingly. I've done a lot of acquiring – of education, experience, expertise. And all of this gets me an important sense of security, defines me, gives me a sense of self-worth. It satisfies some of the need I have, and is in many ways, a good and well-placed effort.

Yet I also feel a strong pull in the opposite direction; a need to give. Not to acquire but to relinquish, not to achieve with pride but to receive with gratitude, not to accomplish but to accept, not to prevail but to serve. I think when I'm focused on getting, then I'm focused on me, and relying on me. When I focus on giving – and releasing and accepting, I'm focused – not on me – but on the world about me, and on you; not on my needs, but on the needs of others. Attentive to what you bring, what you offer, what the world – in all its beauty and its cruelty, has to offer. When I can release my grip on my own need to get, even a little, I find that I am not caught up in anxious climbing; I find some peace and gratitude.

C.S. Lewis suggested that humanity is "amphibious"; we live simultaneously in both the mundane physical world, as well as the spiritual heavenly world. The question for me is **how** do I – or we – shift or move so as to live more and more in the abundance that God intends and provides?

In 2005 the Vestry and I approved a new mission, to: "Grow spiritually and in diversity as we increase member and community participation in our ministries and double attendance in worship by 2008." I was thrilled. We had been talking for several years about the importance of evangelism and it seemed that the seeds were finally bearing fruit. Here was a bold statement in which we committed ourselves to reach beyond. And we put some teeth into it by making it quantifiable. True, it may be overly ambitious to imagine doubling a congregation's size within three years, but if you're going to dream, hey, there's no point in dreaming timidly.

As with a new set of clothes, we set forth with a new vision and plan; trying it on, seeing if it fit or pinched, how it wore over time. Initially, it felt excellent. As if we'd put on something trim and athletic, the parish leadership took steps for new adventure, pushing edges, taking risks.

This plan has been an excellent guiding light and helped us grow tremendously in many ways. But over time, I found that the specific determination to increase the number of active parishioners evoked an unanticipated response within me. For at a deep level, I found myself eying people acquisitively. Parishioners became something I (we) needed to get, to hold, and to retain. Sunday visitors were not just to be welcomed, but to be coveted. The feeling within me was one of jealousy and of hoarding; hoarding for Jesus. Bringing people to Christ is part of our discipleship. Yet Jesus does not call us to get people, or acquire people, or to hang onto people. So, I found myself rebelling, inwardly bucking and refuting the vision I had so eagerly embraced.

A Christian posture toward others is defined by generous giving; we are to give ourselves away, give our love to God, to neighbor, and stranger. At a spiritual level, we are called to release, relinquish, trust, and share.

Does this lead me to conclude that church growth is a misguided objective? No. Growth is essential. But if growing-by-getting is anathema to the Gospel, what then? How about "growing-by-giving"? What if all the organizational and missional energy we have is focused on giving ourselves away; giving ourselves as freely as we are able, as freely as we dare – to God, to neighbor, and to stranger?

I suppose it's possible that we'll just give away all that we have and then have nothing left. In a zero sum game that's how it would work. Not so when the gift we have to give is love. Giving love, loving others, generates more love; nothing is diminished; loving creates love. I wonder how our ministries and lives might shift if we seek to refocus our energy and ask ourselves: What gifts do we have to offer to others? What can I share? To whom shall we give ourselves and our gifts? What gift is needed?

Lovely, grand questions. I love grand questions and philosophical ponderings. And I know they'll add up to a hill of beans, if I don't translate them into specific steps. This is why faith requires discipline: to move the stirrings of our hearts and spirits into tangible action in our lives.

I have found specific steps that help me grow in generosity. The first of these is prayer: both the prayer of silent stillness in which I may be attentive to the quieter voices within my own heart and the world around me, as well as prayer for others, in which I lift up friends, family, the world, each of you – lift you up before God, that I might sense your present need, your present joy, with greater clarity. Daily prayer is essential for me. Out of prayer

comes the second step, which is to do something for somebody else, each day. To do something for somebody else each day. And the third is to give, specifically to give my money – the money that has been given to me – to give it; not give it “away,” but give it “for” or “to.” I give it because I need to give. And the very act of giving it, helps grow generosity within me. Because in so doing I confront that other need; the need to get, to hold, to control. Just as plainly as sit-ups will help our abdominal muscles, giving helps our generosity muscles.

The first decision is to give, the second is to decide how much to give. I give more now than I used to; as with sit-ups, I have built up a greater capacity. And as with sit-ups, I am helped by setting goals for myself. Ten the first week, fifteen the next, twenty after that. So also, two percent of my income this year, 2.5 percent the next, three percent after that. Scripture speaks of the tithe of 10 % - which is a good goal if you're starting out. As you grow in generosity, and exercise your own capacity to give, you may well find yourself traveling right by that 10 % mark.

Finally, I decide who or what to give to or for: for the love of God, for the spread of justice and mercy. Who is doing this work? Who is carrying it out? The majority of my giving is to the church, to St. Peter's, for the work of God that we do together. I also give to a host of other places where I believe that holy work is being done.

If you find yourself living with both a need to get and a need to give, then ask yourself: how do I measure a generous heart? What would it be like for me to give, freely, with abundance? “Come, follow me,” says Christ. Give yourself in love for others.