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**Be Careful What You Ask For**

Mark 10: 35-45

My neighbor just found out I am an ordained minister. Usually when this happens several reactions can occur. Either they apologize to *me* for not attending *their* church, or they offer a rather morbid curiosity about what I do, or they politely start backing away, explaining that they really should be going. This neighbor, however, has not done any of these things. Instead, she has begun sharing with me her experiences at her new Thursday night Bible study. They are an eclectic group of her friends: Disciples of Christ, Baptists and Pentecostals. She is a regular churchgoer and she is excited to learn more about the Bible and to deepen her prayer life. Yet, with all of this, she tells me that this past Thursday was her last hurrah in the group. "Why," I asked. "Because of the bees," she said.

Here is what happened: The leader of her group had been gardening one afternoon and a bee got into her hair. She brushed at it and brushed at it and it wouldn't go away. It was then that she prayed, "Jesus," she asked, "please make this bee leave me alone!" And, wouldn't you know, that bee left her. "Jesus took care of me," she told the group. "All I had to do was pray and he answered." Others in the group began to share similar stories. "I had back pain once and I prayed and he healed me," one said. "Whenever I need him he is always right beside me and he talks to me," said another. On and on, each woman shared. My neighbor asked them, "What about all those people whose prayers aren't answered?" "Faithless," she was told. "They just don't have enough faith." "So can you see," she asked me, "why last Thursday was my last time?" I could see.

I'm sure you have heard about or met Christians who practice this kind of "name it and claim it" theology. They can quote Bible passage after Bible passage about the faithful receiving their blessings, about the righteous sharing in glory. They might even quote from today's Mark passage when two disciples say to Jesus, "Teacher, we want you to do whatever we ask of you." James and John, Zebedee's sons, are "name it and claim it" kinds of people. They come up to Jesus and ask for places of honor, seats next to him in his glory and he tells them they will get something; they will share his cup and his baptism. As for left and right-handed seats, those are not his to give. They see what they want and they go to Jesus and claim their blessing and, whether we like their style or not, Jesus does not rebuke them or ignore them.

Perhaps this is your style too. Probably, as Presbyterians, it is not. Even so, we too speak a great deal about blessings and the ways God has blessed our life. If we don't like the idea of Jesus answering one person's prayers for a bee to depart or prayers for a better parking space, all under the auspices of greater faith, while more fervent and pressing prayers seemingly go unanswered, then what do we believe? What constitutes a blessing and how *does* Jesus bless us?

Here are a few things the scriptures are pretty clear on. Jesus does not promise us the blessing of prosperity. He doesn't offer the blessing of winning. He doesn't even guarantee us the blessing of happiness. These are all wonderful gifts but they are not the kinds of things Jesus focuses on. All we have to do is look at his own life to know this. Here, in Mark's gospel we are confronted with a Christ who does not have such "blessings." He is marching toward Jerusalem as his disciples follow along

behind him. He has, just before our reading, announced for the third time what will happen to him once he gets there. He is facing betrayal and death. He will not “win” in any standard sense of the word. He is not “happy” with this outcome. In fact, he asks to get out of it, to have this cup taken from him. Even then he does not get his way. If Jesus, God’s own son, does not receive these “blessings” neither can we assume them.

We learn in scriptures that Jesus is not some kind of celestial bellboy; one who answers our every desire if only we will ring a bell to get his attention. He does not offer easy blessings, doing whatever it is we ask of him. Any blessing he can bring to us has been won for us the hard way for, Mark tells us, he is not a bellboy. He is a ransom. He has paid for us with his own life. The blessings he can offer come out of that gift. They have come at a price.

Knowing this, then, what can we ask for? What blessings can we ask from the Lord? Here are but a few: We can ask for freedom. It is what he gives. He has freed us from our chains so that we can live without their weight. If you have become trapped, weighted down, imprisoned by your own life, he can free you and cut loose those bonds that hold you so tightly. You can ask him to cast out fear from your life so that you can live as a hopeful person. This is because he has faced every fear for you and taken it on himself so that you can let it go. You can live with courage, knowing that Christ will carry you when you falter. You can ask him for joy; not happiness, but joy. Events might happen in our lives that make happiness a memory. People get sick. We can lose the ones we love. Our bodies may betray us. Happiness may not come to us but joy can. Joy is deeper and fuller and richer and it can continue through the happy times and the sad. We can ask for joy to touch us, joy in Christ’s love and joy in the gift of our lives.

Freedom, fearlessness, and joy: none of these are easy blessings. They will not be offered for a little extra tip on the side. But if you want to name and claim a blessing, claim these for Christ is offering them. Christ has won them for us.

That’s really the problem with the bees—not that my neighbor’s friend was asking too much—she was asking too lightly. She had forgotten the cost. Jesus yearns to bless us. It’s true! In both large ways *and* small and we have the right to ask for these blessings. But let us not ask too lightly, forgetting the one who gives them. He did not come to meet our every desire. James and John soon learn that they are following a man whose own desires were not met, a man who would suffer and be killed. And a man who will save them. They quickly learn what his glory really is; what blessings they can ask for.

We too follow this man. He does not offer seats of honor or easy blessings. He is too focused for these things for he is on his way to Jerusalem where, instead, he will offer us his life. A blessing to be sure. Amen.