



Westminster Presbyterian Church

Sue Hamilton - October 21, 2018 Sermon

What Stops me from Putting my Faith in God?

Text: "Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not rely on your own insight. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths.—Proverbs 3:5, 6

Years ago when we lived in Oklahoma City, I did a nine-month CPE (Clinical Pastoral Education) experience in a major medical center. I had already graduated from seminary and was beginning to feel drawn to a focus in pastoral care. I realized training in a hospital setting would be helpful. Not surprisingly chaplain interns were required to formulate goals each quarter to promote learning. Though I had done hospital visitation by this time the medical world was still largely unfamiliar. A daily routine helped. Each morning the pastoral care staff and interns met briefly. The intern on call from the previous night would give their report and then we were given daily hospital admit sheets for the floors we routinely visited. I don't know how things are done now, certainly not with paper, but at that time as I recall, admit sheets had a patient's name, age, sex, physician's name and admitting diagnosis. I had some vague understanding of terms which did increase over the course of the year, but mostly medical terminology was shrouded in mystery. To do something about this, I decided my first quarter goal would be to learn as many medical terms as I could believing that if I understood why someone was in the hospital I could offer better pastoral care. Fortunately, I had an understanding and wise supervisor. He did not discourage my goal though he knew then as I know now, that such knowledge does not determine one's ability to listen well. By not interjecting his thoughts he provided room for my discovery and growth. I came to realize that though such information can be helpful at times, understanding a medical condition is not necessary for offering care. His nonjudgmental stance gave freedom for me to explore what was underneath this desire to know. Below the tip of the iceberg was fear; fear that I would not know what to do or to say. Had my supervisor intervened quickly or suggested that my goal be reshaped I might have missed this important discovery.

I think something similar was operating in our gospel passage. Jesus is on route to Jerusalem with his disciples with crowds following behind. James and John approach him directly and say, "Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you." Stepping outside the situation for a moment, it is easy to imagine these words coming from mouths of children trying to weasel something out of their parents, knowing that that they are not likely to get what they want. Instead, we know this request comes from grown men, which is

all the more surprising, yet Jesus does not seem upset nor does he try to shut them down. Engaging in conversation he asks, "What is it you want me to do for you?" They reply, "Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory."

This is not a neutral request, favoritism always stirs the pot. When the other disciples learn of this they are rightfully angry. But Jesus does not get caught up in the appropriateness of their demand. He looks at James and John through eyes of love, wanting them to understand and see more fully who and what he is.

It is easy to make quick judgments; we all do. Judgments lead too and motivate action. Sometimes they call for immediate response, for instance if a child starts to dart out in the street, or a door is about to close too quickly on someone trying to move through. Not wanting anyone to get hurt there is no question; we take action. Other judgements are emotionally charged, inwardly. We experience a visceral reaction to what we hear or see, perhaps accompanied with a physiological response. Generally these judgments are better served with a bit of space allowing time before words or action follow.

Jesus responds to James and John with a statement of truth. "You do not know what you are asking." This week I recalled a similar statement spoken while serving a church in Omaha. I was visiting an elderly woman at her home and this was our first visit. Her sight was impaired but she greeted me by name when I arrived. We enjoyed a lovely conversation. Years later, one comment remains with me. Telling me about what was going on with her health; she paused and looking straight at me, said, "You know nothing about this." I was not offended or uncomfortable. She was speaking truth and she was right. I did not know anything at the time of that which she spoke, but I wanted to understand. Loving truth telling does that. Cutting to the quick its meaning penetrates the spirit, and if we allow it, can take us to a place of deeper understanding.

This is what Jesus was trying to do with James and John. He could have stopped them right then and there and said their request was ridiculous and misguided, but he didn't. He didn't want the conversation to end. He did not want to cut off the possibility for greater understanding. Probing a little further he asks, "Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?" We know what happens. Without thought they immediately respond, "Yes, we are able."

Many would say with these words, James and John cement the obvious. They are seeking privileged positions when Jesus enters his kingdom and will do whatever is necessary to secure their spot. Leaving behind their previous life they have been devoted disciples. Why not ask the question? But what if something else is going on, something that even James and John are not fully aware of? Maybe, underneath it all, in a place where mean-

ing formulates and words have yet to be accessed, the place where inner truth resides, they are beginning to put together the pieces of what Jesus has been saying. As one commentator notes, "Maybe Jesus' ominous predictions of his passion have become clear to them. Maybe they do understand what lies ahead. And being afraid, they seek the promise of a secure future. James and John may not just be power hungry; they may rather be acting quite naturally on their fears."

We all know what it is like to be afraid. It is not a pleasant feeling. Our heart or breathing may quicken; we may feel stymied or even paralyzed and not know what to do. Fear can cause us to overcompensate and work even harder, creating a whirlwind of activity or emotion. Sometimes we are in touch with our fear, for instance, the uneasy feeling that can occur before a surgery, the anxiety in facing a tough exam, anticipating a move or wondering how we will make ends meet. Some fears find quick resolution and worry slips away; the job comes, the acceptance letter arrives, surgery is successful and the outlook, good. Other fears shake us to our core; a loved one dies, a marriage ends, medical tests deliver difficult truth. And there are fears that lurk beneath the surface operating silently. We do not realize they are there, yet they affect the way we live and the things we do or say. Relevant to all, fear, whether recognized or not, throws us off balance and can prompt us to say and do things that do not reflect our best self.

Could that have been playing in the situation before us with James and John? It is for you to decide, but I think it is part of the mix. Someone close to me has said more than once that she has learned that tough things in life are often felt and acknowledged inwardly before they can be verbalized outwardly. Like my wise supervisor, maybe Jesus could see something else operating in James and John. Through even conversation he offers safe space in the hope that fears and uncertainty could be recognized.

Specifically, Jesus wants for James and John to get off the relentless treadmill of striving that jockeys for position and security above all else, and for the rest of the disciples to be freed from their anger. Either focus hinders the placement of faith from where it belongs, with God. Jesus reminds them that the leaders of the Gentiles lord it over their people and some acts as tyrants. This is not how it should be with them. It is neither the way of Jesus nor what it means to be a disciple. The weeks ahead, that lead to Jesus' passion will make that clear. For now, Jesus wants them to know in his kingdom, here and now, servitude determines greatness. This is the way of Jesus, not to be served but to serve. How much do they understand about all of this, we don't know, but perhaps the better question is what we make of it? Are their places where we jockey for position or strive to be recognized and noticed? What are the things that consume our thoughts and hinder our fully placing our faith in God?

There is no magic formula to sort this out nor is there anything wrong with wanting our lives to count. It is perspective and where our focus lies that matter. Mark's gospel tells us clearly the importance and priority of serving. No matter what our circumstance there is usually some way we can reach out and bless the life of another. Whether in word or in action any such movement always moves us towards God and lessens the grip of fear or whatever else might be distracting us. The wisdom of proverbs encourages this turning; "Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not rely on your own insight. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths." As we travel we do the best we can.

Barriers or setbacks in life befall us all. At times we lose our way. In such moments we may benefit from the gift of a friend, a spiritual friend that will listen to us, and offer grace filled space. We discover that our difficulties actually can become the means of grace. Wendell Berry puts it this way. "It may be that when we no longer know which way to go we have come to the real journey...The impeded stream is the one that sings." Thanks be to God. Amen.

[i] Charles L. Campbell, *Feasting on the Word, Year, Year B Volume 4* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), p.191.