**“What is it you want me to do for you?”**

I can remember when I was a teenager and I wanted to do something that I knew would be a hard sell to my parents. There was definitely a strategy to how to go about getting what I wanted. I knew which parent was the one to go to first depending on the nature of the request. “Hey, Daddy, I’m your girl right?” “Mom, if you just say yes I promise I won’t ever ask you for anything again. I know all of the parents and former teenagers out there know what I’m talking about.

So, I wonder what Jesus was thinking when James and John work their way up to him on the road, making sure they are out of earshot from the others. Perhaps he’s hopeful. Maybe he’s thinking that they want to talk about the teaching he’d been doing with them as they have traveled over the past few weeks. Maybe they have finally understood what he has been telling them about the fate that awaits him, and them, in Jerusalem.

Instead what he hears is ….Hey Jesus! Nice day, huh? Man, your hair is lookin’ good. Is that a new robe? Oh and, by the way, *“Teacher, we want for you to do whatever we ask of you”.* And just like with my mom and dad, the gyrations my teenage-self went through rarely got the result I was wrangling for, and……Jesus doesn't fall for their ploy one darn bit.

Honestly, I found myself feeling embarrassment for James and John as they make their request. In fact, it looks like Matthew in *his* telling of the incident is so embarrassed for James and John, the Sons of Thunder, that he has their mother make the request for them!

Hey, it’s easy to make fun of James and John and all of the disciples the way that Mark tells their story. But that’s not really fair. If I’ve learned one thing, it’s really that the qualities in people that I find the most annoying or silly, are most often some of my own. It takes one to know one, right?

What if Jesus asked you, *“What is it you want me to do for you?”* What would your answer be? Would your request be absent of desires for power or prestige? What about security, knowing what the future will hold…wouldn't that be nice to know?

James and John are having a hard time letting go of what they have known all their lives; the models that demonstrate that any ruler destined to have power and glory, needs good people around them to help, to advise them, to make sure that the right people are in the right places. That’s the way it works in the Empire. They want the security of knowing that they will be there right next to Jesus when it happens. They want to be in with the in crowd when Jesus is in charge. It’s a privilege they believe they have earned.

I am amazed at the compassion Jesus shows to them. His answer is not necessarily one of impatience or anger, but of honest challenge and concern. “You do not know what you are asking” he says. “Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?”

While Jesus is alluding to his upcoming pain and death, they are eager to let their teacher know they are two rough and ready guys, there for whatever high-ranking responsibility he needs them to fulfill. Jesus’ response doesn't offer the life of privilege or status they are expecting. His answers, grounded in a message of powerful weakness, holy humiliation, submissive authority and priestly servanthood, just don’t work in their way of thinking about the Kingdom.

Once the other disciples catch on that the two brothers have gone behind their backs to request special treatment and privilege from their Master, they too reveal just how much they remain tied to their old ways of seeing the world. It’s more “mirror, mirror, on the wall, who is the greatest of them all?” all over again.

Jesus tries yet another tactic to help his friends truly understand what the real pattern of hierarchy in God’s world is about. If they are to be authentic leaders, they have got to stop looking to the examples of the powerful to draw their conclusions about how to do it. You know that definition of insanity - doing the same thing over and over in the same way and expecting different results. Jesus lets them know that it is pure insanity to continue on a path of leading from a place of power, prestige and privilege in order to oppress and control.

How many times have we heard it said that Jesus turns the world upside down? I’ve been thinking that perhaps what is the real truth of our situation is that we have been we have been living our lives upside down all along and Jesus is here to put us right side up. It’s not an easier, softer way of living, but a better way of being in God’s world.

Jesus recognizes that we, like the disciples are bombarded and thoroughly contaminated by the messages that are placed before us every day; False messages of control, power, money, prestige and security. Messages that tell us that:

* more is better,
* that new is better than used,
* that caring for the environment somehow equates to being financially irresponsible,
* that aging is something to be ashamed of,
* that embracing the common humanity of all people threatens our own personhood,
* and….. that being poor or without a country or shelter somehow defines people as bad or dangerous.

This systematic messaging we see and hear all around us amounts to a pervasive kind of spiritual bondage.

Franciscan priest and spiritual writer Richard Rohr, in Breathing Under Water: Spirituality and the Twelve Steps, writes this about addiction, *“We are all addicted in some way. When we learn to identify our addiction, embrace our brokenness, and surrender it to God, we begin to bring healing to ourselves and our world.”* Jesus’ message of humble servanthood challenges the skewed and distorted ways of the world.

Over the past few weeks in the lectionary readings from Mark’s gospel, Jesus has been seeking to redirect our instincts and free us from life-diminishing illusions of power. He has been spoon-feeding us the antidote to our own unhealthy attachments to the messages swirling endlessly around us.

* Care for the poor
* Heal the sick
* Embrace and protect the little ones
* Practice humility
* Let go of those absolutes we hold on to at the cost of relationship
* Know that real power is found in surrender to God’s will, and
* Authentic love is not found in what we receive from the world, but in how we serve God in the world

There is a transformation, a right-side up-ness that comes through servanthood. That is the real hope that God has for us……… that we can let go of those things, attitudes, and ways of seeing ourselves in the world that keep us prisoners, and to walk toward what is life-giving. The Twelve Step programs of recovery from addiction have *Three Legacies* that serve as guiding principles for their organizations and members – *Unity, Recovery and Service*. That sounds remarkably close to what Jesus is offering us as remedies to the upside down messaging the world presents to us. Unity is found in the community of the Body of Christ, and the Recovery of spirit is the gift we receive by living our lives in Service to each other.

Presiding Bishop Michael Curry writes this, “*Being a Christian is not essentially about joining a church or being a nice person, but about following in the footsteps of Jesus, taking his teachings seriously, letting his Spirit take the lead in our lives, and in so doing helping to change the world from our nightmare into God’s dream.”*

The answer to the mystery of life in the cup we are presented and the Baptism we are offered and is not found in absolute certainty and control, but in getting dirty and living into the messiness of humble service, finding our true identity as a beloved child of God – one among many. The formation of the beloved community, a complete turnover of how we do things, a radical transformation of usual life and culture – an invitation to become that which we most deeply yearn to be and become – to offer our own lives to others and in so offering find ourselves.

And so, when Jesus asks, “What is it you want me to do for you?” What will your answer be?

Amen.