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Mark 10:35-45  
West Missouri Convention  
30 October 2009

Maybe it is the paint color. Maybe it is the arrangement of the furniture. But whatever it is, they say that when you go into an office as the new boss one of the first things you do is change at least one thing to show that things are going to be different. One of the first things I did when I started work at the church where I was a rector before becoming bishop was to open the doors to the building; Literally, I opened the doors. It was a downtown congregation that had been fearful of street crime, its attendance had dwindled through the years, and on any weekday you needed to use a buzzer and intercom to get in.

But open doors are scary. When we open them, we are exposing ourselves, letting new light in on corners long dark. The action forces us to begin to see ourselves in a new light. When I recently asked a small congregation in to physically open their front doors on Sunday morning, the answer was, "But that is too hard to do."

I know that I certainly learned a hard lesson when I opened those doors in the church where I was once rector. It ended up that one day I found myself face to face with a middle-aged man holding a manila folder. For all the both hard-and-easy-to-quantify reasons that I won't even go into, he looked like a charismatic, evangelical Protestant minister. In this part of the country we know them when we see them.

We had never before met, and he asked if I was the new minister. I had been rector for some time when this took place, so I could sense that he was making the circuit and had just gotten back to Little Rock, as ministers of a certain sort are wont to do. He told me that he and the previous minister (as he called the rector) had spent a lot of time in prayer together, which I surmised to mean that they must have at one time been at the same prayer breakfast and exchanged cards. In the space of ten minutes he told me several times that many people had been praying for the project about which he had come to visit and about which he showed me some photos and letters of recommendation in that manila folder. He said he needed my prayers as well.

By now you probably know where this story is going. I listened half-heartedly, remembering that I have taught more than one curate that when strangers come in asking for prayer, it is code language for, "I want money." A priest can either sit there for an hour and hear the person's entire life story, or she can cut to the chase and ask, "Now, what is it you want me to do for you?" And that is what I finally did that day.

That stranger coming through the door made me irritable, but it was not his fault. You see, what had happened when I opened those church doors is that I was opening myself to the possibility that someone just like this very guy might come in and remind me of

my own pitiful prayer life because his actions were indeed a prayer. And when I am reminded of how his life is indeed a reflection of my own, I find it disconcerting, and I would rather keep the doors closed.

That stranger with the manila folder was doing nothing more or less than offering the same sort of prayer that we all offer, those clumsy attempts to get what we want, those calls for God or someone to change the world to meet our needs. It is the prayer that asks God to do what we want done. It is a dangerous prayer to utter and a dangerous place in which to be, for when we so pray and then we don't get the things we are asking for, we feel that God doesn't like us, or we are not good enough, or that we have not yet learned how to work the system. If that is where you find yourself as well, don't worry; we are in such good company. Look no further than James and John in today's gospel. You see, our gospel is a story about prayer.

The prayer of James and John is cloaked in the guise of talking to the historical Jesus, which, come to think of it, is not that far from what we do as we close our eyes and pray to the Jesus with a brown beard and first century robe. The prayers of these two disciples may not involve going to a church and getting down on one's knees, and it may not be the panicked utterance of a parent when a teenage child has not yet come home at 3 a.m., but these guys are praying just the same. And the scary, unsettling part of this gospel story is that, like so many gospel stories, it exposes what is not whole—not holy—in our own lives as well.

In the lesson, James and John, part of Jesus' inner circle, come to him with the prayer that every child has uttered when he has seen something he wants, or that we have uttered before a job interview, or spouses or children have prayed in the hallway of a hospital, "God, would you please just do the following for me?" In the case of James and John, the request is to sit at Jesus' right hand and left hand when the government is overthrown and Jesus takes control. As you might guess, what Jesus can do for them, and by implication what Jesus can do for us, is rarely what they wanted or what we want.

Jesus knows that the kingdom of God is not like a worldly kingdom in which a ruler or president or prime minister can dispense favors and use armies and money to change circumstances. That sort of kingdom only works for so long, and never ends up being very godly because it is all about control. Rather, the kingdom of God is about new ways of seeing the situations that we have been given and over which we have no control. Jesus turns the tables on his petitioners, as is so often the case when people come to him with questions. He answers their question by asking them if they are able to do what needs to be done, are they able to change? It gives an entirely new meaning to prayer and an entirely new vision of the mission of the church.

Jesus asks a couple of very hard questions to get his point across, and because the gospel writer thought it important enough to record them forty years after his death,

that gospel writer is stating that Jesus is asking the same things of us. Will disciples drink the cup? It is a time-honored way of asking if they and we can endure woe and suffering and an often-inexplicable world beyond our control. Will disciples be baptized? It is a profoundly theological way of asking if they and we are willing to die to whatever we might be holding on to that is less than godly. James and John end up being changed, finally admitting that yes, they are able. What started out as a prayer for human intervention becomes a prayer for the change of self.

The power of being in communion with God is not to give us some sort of special status, as if God will reward us for being good or an intent to be good. Instead, the power of being in communion with God is to have the same sort of experience ultimately shown in the lives of James and John and Peter and the women at the tomb and the other disciples: They manage to survive the death of Jesus because they have discovered something changed about themselves. They find themselves able to suffer and die to what they once held on to and to see themselves and others in a new light. Doors open, and they see Jesus in the guise of other disciples, of gardeners, of fellow walkers on dusty roads. They see the divine in the commonplace in ways that others cannot. They discover resurrection.

And that is where their experience is a pattern for ours. We go to God asking for whatever it is that will make life different, perhaps more fun or more prosperity, and the answer we get is that God will not change the world but calls on us to change how we see ourselves, to take the risk to open doors and look in those corners long dark. Prayer is an opportunity to learn how to live in this simultaneously scary and fascinating world. Open doors and see what God brings our way. Open doors and see how we are changed by the encounter. Act as one ready and willing to die to whatever it is that is holding us back from loving completely and unconditionally. Love the money-seeking itinerant minister. Love the illegal alien. Love the people in not-quite-so-traditional relationships. Love the wealthy CEO. Act as a church whose mission is to open that which has been locked and see how WE will be changed. The mission of the church may be first of all to change who WE are, not change who THEY are.

Sometimes we get it. Sometimes we give up trying to change everyone else, give up trying to change God into our servant. Sometimes we understand that prayer is not to use God for our own purposes, but rather it is our response to God by which we become more Godlike. When we finally get it, our very lives become prayers. Words aren't necessary. At that point, to serve is to pray. To live lovingly is to pray. To live without fear is to pray. To open the door in joyful expectation of whatever might come our way is to pray. As we are reminded in another place in Holy Scripture, "Pray without ceasing." Suddenly we know how that request becomes possible. To pray is to live as a people made whole.

To be shown how to change nothing but ourselves may not be what we were asking for when we first opened doors and thought that we would change the world by so doing. But God keeps questioning us. Will we drink the cup? Will we be baptized?

It is why we must be in church, be in our holy communities, week after week, month after month, year after year. We need to hear to the story of resurrection, not only of the Christ but of us as well. Through our rehearsal every week of the story of Jesus, we discover that new life comes through our own deaths to pride and self-interest and a thousand other human predilections, and that discovery slowly changes us. Our lives become a prayer as we respond to God, and we see that the first mission of the church is to be changed. And in the process the world will be changed. It is the hope on which I base my ministry.

When we are ultimately changed, and the world is ultimately changed because of what has taken place inside us, then we will finally be able to shut the doors of the church because our job will be over. But a not-so-gentle reminder: Don't dare shut them until that takes place. Amen.