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**A Sermon for The Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost
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Sermon preached at Christ Church+Washington Parish
by the Rev. Martha Wallace ©**

Every one of us wants to be special. It kind of goes with being human — this desire to be to be favored. When we are very young, we want our parents to love us best. When we are older, we want our grandchildren to prefer us to their other grandparents.

In between, we want to be teacher's pet, class president, homecoming queen, captain of the team, head cheerleader, solist in the choir, first chair in the orchestra, the wittiest guest at the party, the best teacher, the most esteemed litigator, the most gifted cook, the most hospitable host, the most sought after guest, the most successful lobbyist, the most savvy CEO . . . Feel free to insert your desired first place position if I left it off the list.

It seems the disciples were no different. They also wanted to be special. They had their hopes, dreams, and ambitions, just like we do. Today's Gospel gives us yet another opportunity to see ourselves in the disciples and, as usual, it's not a pretty picture.

James and John don't want much really — just to be guaranteed the two top posts — Secretary of State and Treasury Secretary in the new world government Jesus is about to inherit. To insure the success of their petition, they employ a gambit we have all used ourselves at one time or another. If you are a parent, you have probably had it used on you by your children.

Here's how it goes: "Promise you'll say yes to whatever I am going to ask you next!" Well, whatever is coming next is almost certainly not something we are going to want to say 'yes' to. We all know that and the requester knows it, too, or they wouldn't be trying to get us to say 'yes' before we hear the request.

Jesus is like wise parent who never falls for that ploy. He asks them: "What is it you want me to do for you?" And it is at that point, that James and John ask for the high priced box seats in the kingdom of heaven. Their request must have just about broken Jesus' heart.

For one thing, the timing could not have been worse, coming immediately after Jesus has told them for the third time that he is headed for Jerusalem where he is going to be arrested, tortured and executed. Even

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worse, it showed that they understood Jesus as he has been describing the kingdom of God to them.

In their defense, James and John probably were justified in thinking of themselves as having an 'In' with Jesus. They do seem to have been Jesus' best buddies. At least in all the gospel accounts, they got to go with Jesus to places the other disciples did not get to go.

But, James and John are not taking any chances. They want to firm up their status. When Jesus became King, they expected to be rewarded for their loyalty by being prominently positioned in his new administration. It seems they were hoping for prestige and power. Like a patient parent explaining to children for the umpteenth time that it really wasn't good for them to live on ice cream and pizza, Jesus reiterated what he had previously told them about the reign of God: It wasn't like the kind of kingdoms they imaged. In God's reign, the greatest ones would be servants, not kings, just as was a servant and would soon be dying to ransom the people.

He reiterated the theme he has been hammering into his disciples for some time but they apparently were having a hard time getting it, which is easy for us to understand, because we have a hard time getting it, too.

We hear Jesus' words, but they don't make sense to us because they run counter to every other experience we have. Jesus was trying to get them to understand that they had it backwards — when living in the reign of God one does not seek to be served but to serve others — neighbors and strangers and poor and oppressed people. There is no place for selfishness or self centeredness in the reign of God.

They have had this conversation many times. So this time Jesus tries another approach. He asks "What do you want me to do for you?" thinking perhaps that making them say out loud what it is they are focused on will stimulate them to plumb their hearts for the deepest and most profound needs rather than the grasping for worldly power uppermost in James' and John's minds.

At the very least, Jesus must have hoped that forcing them to say it out loud would help them see it for the selfish, shallow and wrongheaded request it was.

"What do you want me to do for you?" Do you hear Jesus asking you this question? — this personal, probing question that forces those of us who would answer to look closely at our own hearts, face our own desires, and see how our desires fit with the values of the reign of God Jesus proclaimed.

Jesus asks us "What do you want me to do for you?" It is a question that asks us to evaluate our faith and our stewardship. It is a question that asks us to examine our understanding of God's reign and our place in it. It is a question that asks us to evaluate our priorities and the extent to which our actions align with what we say our priorities are — in truth how well our actions line up with Jesus' priorities.

"What do you want me to do for you?" Jesus asks us. What vision of the reign of God are you clinging to? Is the desire of your heart a selfish or a selfless one? What would we have Jesus do for us to help us

become more like the followers he invites us to be?

Now, think of this question as it is addressed not just to us individually, but also as it is addressed to us as the Body of Christ gathered on Capitol Hill in this sanctuary: What would you have Jesus do for us as Christ Church Washington Parish?

For two hundred years people here have been asked that question by Jesus and have responded in various ways. We can read in our history how the responses have shaped this community and this parish over two centuries.

This morning as we celebrate those two centuries of Christian life and service in this place, it is fitting that the lectionary has provided us with this great question to guide us as we begin the next two hundred years in this life of this parish: What would we have Jesus do for us together as we continue his work in this community?

What are our priorities? How do they mesh with the reign of God Jesus proclaimed? What would we ask from Jesus to help us be the kind of followers he wants us to be – the kind of church he wants us to be – the kind of lively Gospel community he calls us to be?

How can we avoid the pitfalls James and John exposed to us — of focusing on ourselves when Jesus' whole ministry is aimed at loving and serving others?

Who is the other for us? How can we as a parish best serve the others Jesus calls us to serve? What would we have Jesus do for us to prepare us for the real reign of God – where the last and least are first, and we find our lives as Jesus did, by giving them away.

It is an important question – a strategic question – not only as we begin the next chapter in our two hundred year saga but particularly as we move forward in this transition time toward a time when we will welcome a new rector to serve and lead this community of faith in finding and following Jesus.

Thinking about this triggered a memory of one of my all time favorite movies *My Dinner with Andre* in which Andre Gregory mentions four questions that Stanislavsky said an actor should constantly ask himself to understand the motivations of his character: "Who am I? Why am I here? Where do I come from? And where am I going?"

Andre suggested to his dinner companion Wallace Shawn, that instead of applying them to a role, we should apply them to ourselves. I offer this as something we all should do – individually as Christians and as a church, because focusing on ultimate meaning would help us to ask Jesus for the right thing – the thing that really would bring us into alignment with the reign of God as Jesus described it.

Asking Jesus for the right thing, the real thing, the deep thing is important because the implication of Jesus' question is that Jesus will give us what we ask for if we can figure out how to ask for the right thing.

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This morning James and John present us with a negative model, a model to steer away from, rather than emulate. But remember that this is only a snap shot in the Gospel. We know at least some of the rest of the story – that James and John did come to understand what Jesus was modeling for them. My hope for all of us is that we can, too.

We will have the opportunity to consider this question many times as we continue our journey with Jesus. And each time he asks it, he will wait for our response, and then patiently and lovingly show us when we miss the mark, just as he did for James and John. Because, the best thing about Jesus is that he accepts us regardless of the appropriateness or inappropriateness of our requests. He loves us regardless of our difficulty understanding the upside down character of his way. Luckily for us – Jesus did not call only those who had proven their understanding of God's reign and demonstrated their ability to live in it here and now.

What do you want me to do for you? We hear in Jesus' question a glimmer of his hopes for us. By continuing to ask it, he shows us that his greatest desire is to be with us on the road, to show us by his example how we can live into the reign of God, right here, right now. May it be so.