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What Can I Do For You?

D'ESTA LOVE

One of my favorite texts for ministry contains a question that is as ordinary as the every-day stuff of life. I ask it often in the routine of my day when I get a phone call or someone comes into my office. “What can I do for you?” Often it is a way to start the conversation. But when these words are placed on the lips of Jesus of Nazareth they form a question that opens the floodgates to mercy. We hear this question in a simple and familiar story. A blind man cries for mercy as Jesus passes through Jericho. Jesus hears his cry and asks, “What can I do for you?” The man asks for sight, and Jesus heals him. The story is simple, but the implications for ministry are profound.

TELLING THE STORY

A large crowd has gathered to follow Jesus and the disciples, as they make their way to Jerusalem. Surely the air is charged with a heightened sense of awareness that Jesus is approaching his glory. His time has come, and his face is set toward Jerusalem. The crowd is amazed and some are fearful. Perhaps Jesus’ words still ring in their ears, “See, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be handed over to the chief priests and the scribes, and they will condemn him to death; then they will hand him over to the Gentiles; they will mock him, and spit on him, and flog him, and kill him; and after three days he will rise again” (Mk 10.33-34).

BACKDROP TO JERICHO

Three times he had told them of his death (Mk 8.31; 9.31; 10.33-34). His tone had been urgent as he spoke plainly, and it troubled his disciples. Peter’s rebuke of Jesus was equally urgent, and in return Jesus confronted Peter with the stinging words, “Get behind me, Satan” (Mk 8.33). Then he told them all, including the crowds, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me” (Mk 8.34), but they did not understand. Jesus spoke of glory and power, but not as they might have expected. He also spoke of shame and death. For them the words of Jesus were mixed with incongruent images of glory and shame. They heard him say: “The Son of Man will be killed,” “get behind me Satan,” “take up your cross,” “lose your life for my sake,” “those who are ashamed of me,” “I will be ashamed of them,” “when I come in glory with the angels,” “when the kingdom comes with power,” and they were afraid.

On the mount of transfiguration they saw his glory revealed, but once more he spoke of shame as he predicted his passion. Still the disciples’ thoughts of glory and power persisted, and they argued about who among them was the greatest. It was then that Jesus placed a child in their midst—the least in the family—and taught them about being last and becoming a servant of all (Mk 9.33-37). Why would receiving this powerless one be necessary to receiving Jesus? What did this child have to do with glory and honor? What had he meant about dying and serving and being last? What about their own hopes and dreams as they followed Jesus to Jerusalem? They had many questions, but they were afraid to ask. Then a third time he told

them that he was going to Jerusalem to die. Perhaps the question they should have asked was, “If the Christ must die, what must I do if I am his disciple?”

THE ANSWER WAS NO

What part of servant did James and John not understand? Was it a seeking after power that prompted them to demand of Jesus, “Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you” (Mk 10.35)? Even so, Jesus asked them, “What can I do for you?” They requested positions of power and honor in Jesus’ glory, and he told them no! The rest of the disciples became indignant when they heard of James’ and John’s request, and Jesus instructed them on the ways of power among the Gentiles whose great ones lord it over those in their charge. But it would not be so among the disciples of Jesus. “Whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many” (Mk 10.44-45). The request from James and John was incongruent to the ministry of Jesus. Therefore the answer was no! And so the journey toward Jerusalem continued.

THE ANSWER IS YES

Let us return to our story on the Jericho road. As Jesus and the crowds make their way to Jerusalem they pass through Jericho. In the midst of the excitement and the clamor of the crowd, a solitary voice cries out: “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!” Why, it is only the blind beggar at the side of the road; therefore, many in the crowd try to shut him up. He is an expendable, a powerless one. What does this beggar have to do with Jesus who is on his way to the holy city and to his awaiting glory? And so they sternly order the blind man to be quiet. Do they not hear the echo of Jesus’ words, “Whoever receives this child, receives me”? Perhaps they don’t see the connection. So they dismiss the blind man, and in harsh tones the crowd orders this “sinner” at the side of the road to keep quiet. After all, that is where he belongs—at the margins of society. But Bartimaeus will not be silenced. In his determination he calls out even more loudly, “Son of David, have mercy on me!” (Mk 10.47).

An amazing thing happens. Jesus, who is resolutely making his way to Jerusalem, stands still. The Lord of Heaven and Earth hears the cry for mercy from a “little one” at the side of the road and stands still. The crowd stops and turns toward Jesus as he extends an invitation, “Call him here.” At these words the crowd suddenly becomes interested in this one who would dare disturb the journey of Jesus. With enthusiasm they say, “Get up, he is calling you.” What must it have been like for this man, who sits begging at the side of the road day after day, to hear that Jesus is calling for him? And so he springs up, throws off his cloak, and goes to Jesus.

Can you imagine the scene as the crowd makes room for the beggar to come to Jesus? In the center of this gathering, Jesus, pressed on all sides with the anxious crowd, draws the “little one” into his personal space. With undivided attention he speaks directly to the blind man and asks, “What can I do for you?” This “child,” this powerless one, has been brought from the side of the road into the midst of the crowd. And the “great one” among them does not lord it over him, nor does he exercise authority over him. He does not scold or tyrannize him for presuming to interrupt his journey. He does not debate who sinned, this man or his parents. Nor does Jesus presume to know what the blind man wants of him. He allows Bartimaeus the dignity of making his request of the Son of Man, who came not to be served, but to serve. Jesus receives this beggar and asks of him a question. Hear it again. It is one of the most fundamental questions for ministry. “What can I do for you?” With this question Jesus makes himself fully available to Bartimaeus. Just speak the word. What can I do for you?

It is an empowering question. It allows space for Bartimaeus to genuinely express his need and call upon his teacher for healing. So he says, “My teacher, let me see again.” And the answer is yes! Only moments before, James and John had heard the same question from Jesus. But they had come to him with a demand-

ing spirit and a presumptive tone. They asked for positions of power, and the answer was no. Here, on the Jericho road, the situation is entirely different. A man cries for mercy. His request for healing is consistent with the mission of Jesus, and the answer is yes. Thus, in response to the heart-felt need of Bartimaeus, Jesus says, "Go, your faith has made you well." Jesus heals him and sends him on his way. But Bartimeaus does not go his own way. Rather, he follows Jesus on the way—we can presume—to Jerusalem. His is one of the few positive examples of discipleship in Mark's gospel. He comes to Jesus out of his need for mercy and chooses to follow the one who gave him sight. Therefore, this story provides a model for discipleship. It also provides a model for ministry.

A QUESTION FOR MINISTRY

"What can I do for you?" This is a question that belongs to the natural discourse of each day for many of us. It comes as easily as "Good morning, how are you?" But if it is asked in the spirit of Jesus, it helps us see what ministry looks like in the ordinary, day-to-day routines of our lives. It is a question that takes us into the marketplace, our offices, our homes, our classrooms—posturing ourselves as servants of God, ready to serve, not to be served. When we pick up the phone or open our office door or stoop to the child who is pulling on our apron strings for the 10th time that day and ask, "What can I do for you?" we are assuming the posture of a servant. We receive the person who needs something of us. We give our undivided attention, and we do not presume to know or to judge what the need is. Instead, we empower the one in need to ask—to make a request of us. When we ask what we can do for someone, we are saying, "I make myself and all that is within my power to respond available to you. All you need to do is ask." It is a question that opens the door to ministry.

It also opens the door to mercy. It leads us to genuine needs around us, in our families, and in our workplaces. It also takes us to the roadsides and margins of our world, to hospital beds, and to neglected places. It calls us to listen for the cries for mercy. It compels us not to presume need, but to ask what we can do in the name of Jesus. It is a question that opens the floodgates to mercy. It also enables us to say, "Come, Jesus is asking for you."

If the Christ must die, what are we to do if we are his disciples? The invitation to follow Jesus is to enter the way of the cross, which necessitates a rejection of the world's images of power and status, glory and honor. It is an invitation to participate in the life of God by serving the needs of others with no thought of position and power for ourselves. It is a call to take up the cross daily. The way of the cross leads us to broken and forsaken places, and we do not have to look very far to find them. And so, as we arise each day to go about our daily tasks, God places in our way people who may need something of us. When we ask the question, "What can I do for you?" we open a door for ministry. And we can know assuredly that in the ordinary routine of our lives we participate in the life of God as we listen for and respond to human need around us. Thus, all of life is ministry, and the journey to Jerusalem is sacred.

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