

Twenty-ninth Sunday in Ordinary Time, Cycle B

Hebrews 4:11-16 and Mark 10:35-45

Maria is my mentor in my role as program director at a retreat center. I am in awe of how her commitment to service has transformed her into a Christ-like leader. Anyone who talks to Maria has her full attention. She empathizes and gets inside what is happening for them. She always finds something to affirm and then points out something more – not to one-up them, but because it is a delight to behold. Often her delight holds an unspoken invitation to see in a new way. Maria laughs easily and often, does not take herself too seriously. She is always available to help. She welcomes everyone just as they are. Soon they become something more. More than that, they want to become something more and they feel healed enough to do so. Everyone seeks her guidance. She is the official “listener” for the leadership meetings of the Sisters of Mercy in the western hemisphere. People return to our retreat center because they have been deeply renewed by being with her.

How did Maria come to be so Christ-like? Mercy Sisters take a vow of service. With Jesus and Mercy foundress, Catherine McAuley, as her role models, Maria has chosen daily to make sacrifices, hard ones that left her lonely or suffering with those she serves. She pushes herself to get inside the view of the other person and to offer healing and comfort. She is tireless in this. Maria does not seek rewards; she lives in this moment with an understanding of its pain and a belief in the healing power of love.

Maria is a great foil for James and John in this Sunday’s gospel. They tell Jesus that they are willing to drink the cup of suffering and undergo the death needed for baptismal rebirth. How brave they seem! Yet they will flee when Jesus is arrested. This should not surprise us: their prayer to Jesus is, “We want you to do for us whatever we ask” and what they ask is not the grace to love or suffer, but the reward of hierarchical power, to sit on either side of the successful Jesus. They have failed to see that being a follower of Jesus means living in this moment, not leaping over it to get to the future. The Way of Jesus does not come incentivized with rewards. The humility it requires is itself the goal, not just something to be endured and then discarded. Humility is the essential mechanism that transforms the soul.

Likewise, Jesus asks us, “What do you wish me to do for you?” This question offers the opportunity to recognize our heart’s desire. Do we want to run the show? Do we want all pain removed forever? Do we want freedom? Popularity? Recognition? All these indicate places within us that need healing and conversion. Maybe, though, we are like James and John and we jump over our heart’s desire to imagine ourselves living our desire fulfilled. Jesus acknowledges this is a common choice, “but,” he says, “it shall not be so among you.” The followers of Jesus walk the Way of humility. Our heart’s desire must become the desire for the good of others, whatever the cost to ourselves. Inevitably, goodness blossoms into many rewards, but the reward flows from the way we live in the present moment.

Just as hard as it is for us to imagine how humble service can shape us into amazing leaders, it is hard for us to imagine a God whose whole being is loving service. Surely, the all-powerful God will judge and reject sinners, especially the notorious ones like Adolf Hitler. Surely, the all-loving God will look down on us for not being good enough. Surely, the Master of the Universe cannot be bothered with our little lives. However, Heb 4 gushes about the desire Jesus has to help us: “We do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weakness, but one who has been similarly tested in every way... So let us confidently approach the throne of grace to receive mercy and to find grace for timely help.” The humility of God becoming human signals us that God is available to us. God listens deeply to us. God accepts us as we are and is eager to help. There is no arrogance in God.

The missing piece is our choice to approach God. This takes humility. It happens when we look at what it is we want to ask and identify the part of that “ask” that needs to be transformed. We are then able to pray, “I believe. Help my unbelief” (Mk 9:24). So let Jesus’ eagerness to pour out mercy and grace encourage us to walk the way of service and turn us into the true leaders of our communities.

- ❖ Who is an example for you of humble, Christ-like leadership? How can you imitate them?
- ❖ What do you hesitate to ask God for? Let Heb 4 encourage you to do so.