

“Grant Applications”
20th Sunday after Pentecost (B)
Mark 10.35-45

Pastor Kelly K. Faulstich
Grace Lutheran Church
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In the name of the Father, and of the + Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

The best summary of the human condition that I have ever heard was shared by a seven-year-old girl at her kitchen table. I was working as a nanny for Samantha and her two older sisters when I was at seminary in Hyde Park. And while her older sisters would finish homework, Samantha and I would do art projects, fix dinner, and engage in opera afternoons where we would sing everything that we said.

Samantha was (and still is) a beautiful little girl with a lot of passion. Some might call it a temper, but Samantha had strong convictions, even at age seven. Something wasn't happening the way she wanted it to, I don't recall exactly what it was that day, but at full voice, opera fun quickly abandoned, Samantha flopped into her chair at the kitchen table and proclaimed, "I want what I want when I want it."

I want what I want when I want it. The human condition. The "all about me." The "grant me what I ask because I ask and for no other reason."

I want what I want when I want it.

She didn't submit a 10-page application for what she requested in the kitchen that day. There were no stated boundaries for her desire, no clear requirements to be fulfilled. She was just a passionate little girl wanting what she wanted.

It's the human condition, our sinful nature, wanting what we want when we want it. And parents and nannies, coworkers and friends might see our selfishness in the moment, but we are blinded by our own desires, our own wanting whatever that moment dictates.

James and John are not so very different from little Samantha. In our gospel this morning, they too come with a grant application. Addressing Jesus with what they desire, James and John seem to be demanding, "We want what we want when we want it."

Mark reports that James and John approach Jesus, saying, "Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you." Thinking back a few chapters in Mark's gospel or a few months of Sundays, we recall Herod's offer to the dancing girl: "Ask me for whatever you want and I will give it."

Both the disciples' request and Herod's offer play to individual want and whim. Herod will have to order the beheading of John the Baptist. The disciples will be challenged by their teacher.

"What is it you want me to do for you?" Jesus asks the Zebedee brothers. Their grant application is submitted: "Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory."

Grant us seats of power and privilege.

Grant us honor and fame.

Grant us status, we want what we want, James and John are asking.

This has happened before in Mark's gospel. The disciples don't seem to understand what is going on. Peter rebuked Jesus' prediction of crucifixion. The disciples were arguing along the road about who was the greatest among them. Power and privilege, honor, fame, and status are enticing rewards in anyone's journey.

I've always seen the disciples, especially in Mark's gospel, as a group of ordinary men who didn't always understand what Jesus was teaching them. They often missed the point. Sometimes they are downright childish. However, a commentary I read this week suggested that the disciples weren't foolish but rather that they were still searching for the answers to their questions.

In the greater projection of Mark's gospel, the road to Jesus' crucifixion is full of suspense. Jesus heals but doesn't want anyone to tell about it. Jesus feeds crowds and still storms. Jesus teaches. But in Mark's gospel, it isn't these actions that make Jesus the Son of God. Jesus is on a journey to the cross. And the disciples are either too simple to understand or they just aren't where they need to be quite yet.

When James and John ask to be granted seats of privilege, Jesus answers them in his usual manner, he answers them with a question: Do you really know what you're asking?

Really? Jesus asks. Are you able to take a chair into my baptism and into the sharing of my cup? Jesus knows he's headed for the cross and he knows the struggle and the challenge of living into and dying into God's future for him.

With two disciples asking to be granted higher status and the other ten turned angry, Jesus gives a lesson on service: "whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant...for the Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many."

In his seat on the cross, Jesus as ransom is the greatest of all. Mark continues to move along Jesus story and the story of the disciples, constantly point to and toward the cross.

Part of our worship, our liturgy, our work in this place, can become habitual actions that we don't really think about. We don't always ponder the beautiful significance of the words and actions that happen in this place when we gather as faith community. And like the author of Mark's gospel, all we do is meant to point to and toward the cross of Jesus.

At the font, we recall our baptism into Jesus' death on the cross and Jesus' resurrection. At the table, we recall the last meal before he headed to the cross. We recognize Jesus' presence as ultimate servant in the bread broken and in the wine poured.

Yesterday I attended the ordination of two of my classmates from college. And I couldn't help but ponder the significance of the actions in that worship service, the laying on of hands, the vows made, and the sending of those two young men into service in the church and in the world.

And at the end of the worship yesterday, as is the end of our liturgy here, was the sending of the assembly, the sending of all who gathered. In worship, we are washed or reminded of our washing. In worship, we are fed with a Lord's feast. And in worship, we are sent every week with the words, "Go in peace, serve the Lord."

Go in peace, serve the Lord. Not, "go in peace, get what you want when you want it." Not, "go in peace, serve yourself." Go in peace, serve the Lord. This is a hefty charge. Go serve. Not to get the best seat in the house,

but because of what Jesus did for you on the cross. Go in peace, serve the Lord. Go in peace, serve the Lord.
Jesus the Great Servant died for you and rose again and calls you from baptism to grave, that you might serve.

To the glory of God. Amen.