

Proper 24B, Saint John's Church Olney, 21 October 2018
The Reverend Henry P. McQueen
Job 38:1-7; Psalm 104:1-9, 25, 37b; Hebrews 5:1-10; Mark 10:35-45

S.D.G.

I have a very dear friend who, over the years, I have bought dinner for more times than I can recount. And it is not that I don't love Brian, but most of those times my paying for dinner was not by invitation, it was necessity. You see, during college and after college when we shared an apartment near Philadelphia, Brian would often go out and forget his wallet. After dinner when the check came to the table, or we went to the counter to pay, Brian would start checking all his pockets and then look up and announce "I forgot my wallet".

I have seen movies where someone realizes that they can not pay for their meal and then the scene cuts to images of them washing a pile of dirty dishes as payment. Despite joking about this I never left Brian behind to wash dishes or wait on tables; one of us, usually me, simply paid Brian's share of the bill, I picked up his tab with little expectation of being repaid.

James and John seem to want to be repaid for the sacrifices that they have made. Still showing that they do not quite understand, they are asking to sit to the right and left of the throne of an earthly king. They expect Jesus to be a king like all the other kings that have ruled the land. How wrong could they be?

When approached by James and John, Jesus asks "what do you want me to do for you". This sounds like a bit of deja vu, we have heard this phrase before. Actually next Sunday we hear this exact phrase when blind Bartimaeus calls out to Jesus, Son of David. At the risk of stealing Mother Shivaun's preaching thunder: Jesus responds "what do you want me to do for you?". "My teacher, let me see again", and with that Bartimaeus' sight is restored and he follows Jesus along the way.

The response to James and John is not so kind. Jesus rebukes them, questions their ability to handle the path that they walk, and ultimately tells them that they too will face a martyr's death; though I expect that these messages were lost on them at that moment.

James, John, and Bartimaeus all had a request for Jesus. In both cases he responds “what do you want me to do for you”. One request he grants, the one that was made with a pure heart, with pure intentions. Even with the frequency that my friend Brian forgot his wallet, I know that it was with a pure heart that he said “I forgot my wallet”. The intentions of James and John were not so pure, they did not seek to serve others, only themselves.

So that no moment is wasted, Jesus took that moment of James’ and John’s ill intentions and made it a teaching moment. *“...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”*.

We have before us, all along the Altar rail, a colorful array of prayer shawls. Each of these prayer shawls is created with yarn, prayer, and the pure intentions of the knitter. Each is a symbol of God’s abiding love and presence in our lives, and a prayer shawl is especially comforting at those moments when we need it most. Wrapped in a prayer shawl the recipient of this knitted grace can ask Jesus for what ever they need; quietly, and most assuredly, Jesus will respond “what do you want me to do for you”.

Those who knit these prayer shawls have taken it upon themselves to participate in this important ministry. They have taken an active step to use their own gifts in a way that will serve others.

The knitting of prayer shawls is but one ministry in this parish among countless others; but today it serves as an example of all the other ministries. Knitting a prayer shawl requires intention and the use of your gifts, it is not a passive endeavor. When we hear Jesus use words like “servant” and “slave” we might be tempted to assume a passive role where we must be directed and told what to do, a role where initiative is not rewarded. But those who knit the prayer shawls will tell you that they have to wrangle that yarn into shape, and with decisive movement of the needles create the blankets of God’s love that we see arrayed before us.

A favorite prayer for many is one that is attributed to Saint Francis, the first line of that prayer is “God, make us instruments of your peace.” Make us instruments. Make us active.

During this season we celebrate the gifts that we have been given by God and that we are called to share with God and the church. Our gifts of material resources, our time, and our talents are all to be shared with God and the church. This is not a passive action, this needs to be done with pure intention and willingness of heart.

Remember the words of Saint Francis' prayer:

God, make us instruments of your peace.
Where there is hatred, let us sow love.
where there is injury pardon.
where there is doubt, faith.
where there is despair, hope.
where there is sadness, joy.

O Divine Maker,
Grant that we may not so much seek to be consoled as to console,
to be understood as to understand,
to be loved as to love.

For it is in giving that we receive,
it is in pardoning that we are pardoned,
it is in dying that we are born again to eternal life.

There is nothing passive about that prayer, there is nothing passive about serving. It is for us to recognize the gifts that we have received from God, gifts of time, talent, and treasure, and share those gifts with God and the church. There is much to do, but not so much that any of us should be overwhelmed. Each of us needs to be heard, each of us needs to act. Each of us has something to contribute.

Alan Paton, born at the turn of the twentieth century, was a South African author and anti-apartheid activist, of the prayer of Saint Francis he wrote: *"When I pray this prayer, or even remember it, my melancholy is displaced, my self-pity comes to an end; my faith is restored because of this majestic conception of what the work of a disciple should be.*

So majestic is this conception... This world ceases to be one's enemy and becomes the place where one lives and works and serves. Life is no longer nasty, mean, brutish, and short, but becomes the time that one needs to make it less nasty and mean, not only for others, but indeed also for oneself.

We are brought back instantaneously to the reality of our faith, that we are not passive recipients but active instruments."

God, make us instruments of your peace.

Amen,