

Edina Morningside Community Church  
United Church of Christ  
Sunday, October 18, 2015  
Rev. Howard K. Bell  
*What are we seeking?*

We are going to use our two texts today – one from the Old Testament book of Job and one from the Gospel of Mark – to help us reflect on ourselves as seekers and as givers. The clue to understanding today's message might be: When it comes to issues of faith – seeking and giving may mean the same thing. The miracle of our faith, I believe, is that when we are faithful, particularly in giving of our time, talent and financial resources we receive what we are seeking, which is a deeper relationship with God. By giving we find that which we seek.

Let us turn now to our text from Job. What is it that Job has been seeking throughout the book of Job? Job was seeking to live in a way pleasing to God– blameless and upright. I imagine most of you are familiar with this story. We are told that Satan asks God to put Job to the test and God permits Satan to bring all kinds of evil upon Job in order to test Job. In Job's time, the people clearly believed that if evil came upon someone it was because they had done something that offended God. Therefore, Job's friends all try to counsel Job to examine his life to see how he has offended God. Job maintains his innocence.

I can identify with questioning God's goodness or understanding why bad things happen to good people through some experiences in my life. I imagine all of us have some challenging experiences in our lives. One experience in my teenage years challenged my faith and made me question God. It was the summer of 1963. I met Linda at church high school youth summer camp in June. We were both 16 years of age and she became my girlfriend for that week. Even though we lived in different cities, we managed to spend some additional time together in the coming weeks. I truly felt blessed to have Linda in my life. However, by August of that same year, Linda was diagnosed with sleeping sickness. I was notified that she was in the hospital in an iron lung. Within a week she had died. I struggled to understand how God could have allowed this tragedy to happen. I railed against God.

Fortunately I had better friends and people within my church that supported me in a different way from the way Job's friends supported him. No one accused me – or accused Linda - of offending God and bringing this tragedy on us. There truly was no satisfactory answer to the question of why this happened. However, what I experienced as having received from God in my young life, still seemed greater to me than what I had lost. I continued on my path of seeking to be close to God and to serve God.

This brings us to today's text. Job is seeking to have God answer to him for what Job feels is injustice done unto him. Job has been faithful to God throughout his life, yet has suffered in ways beyond our imagination. Rather than answering Job's questions, we read these words: *"Then God answered Job out of the whirlwind: "Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge? Gird up your loins like a man, I will question you, and you shall declare to me. "Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?" (Job 38: 1 – 4a)*

Biblical commentator, Mark A. Throntveit, says this about today's text from job: *"In a very literal sense, the book of Job raises more questions than it answers. At the very least, however, we are assured that God is God, and we are not; and that we are human beings who struggle with things we cannot understand. Nevertheless our hope is tied to the firm conviction that this same God will take care of that which we do not understand, as we see in the created world around us."*<sup>1</sup>

"That God is God and you and I are not." That is a most important message when we think we know better than God for ourselves or for others. Yet, we need also to continue to trust that God will take care of us. It is often through pain and tragedy that we – eventually – come closer to God. Not that I believe that God causes the pain or tragedy in order to draw us closer; but simply that we come to accept what we do not understand. Often, through pain and tragedy, we are able to find that which we truly seek.

This brings us to our second text – from the Gospel of Mark. What is it that we are told that James and John, the Sons of Zebedee are seeking? The text says they made the following request of Jesus: "Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory."

Commentator David B. Howell adds this perspective: *In Mark's Gospel, this request follows Jesus' third prediction of his passion (10:32-34). It is surprising then, that these two disciples would ask for seats beside Jesus in his coming glory. Had they not been listening? Actually, this encounter is yet another episode in Jesus' ongoing struggle to teach the disciples about the significance of the kingdom of God being near (Mark 1:15).*<sup>2</sup>

It is easy for us today, to be judgmental of James and John and to question why they repeatedly fail to understand what Jesus is teaching. Howell continues: *"Part of our chagrin may have something to do with the fact that we are all in some ways sons of Zebedee. Certainly we know better than to make outlandish, insensitive requests, as this narcissistic duo does, but we want the best seats in the house. We may not be upfront about our self-centered yearnings, but many of us spend our lives scheming for those kinds of privileged positions...We want our children to be at the top of the class. We want a lot of things that we never admit out loud."*

And what is it that each of you seeks in your personal, work or professional lives? I believe that all of us who desire to work hard, to love intensely and to care deeply – such goals as these, help us to achieve the things that we seek. I can identify with James and John in many ways. I know that I have worked hard to achieve many things in my professional career and in my personal and family life and in my volunteer roles. While I profess that much of what I have done has been to serve others, I also acknowledge that I am an ambitious and

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<sup>1</sup> Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary - Feasting on the Word – Year B, Volume 4: Season After Pentecost 2 (Propers 17-Reign of Christ).

<sup>2</sup> Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary - Feasting on the Word – Year B, Volume 4: Season After Pentecost 2 (Propers 17-Reign of Christ).

prideful person – not unlike these Sons of Zebedee. I am proud of the organizations I have started and that they remain a living legacy of the vision that I - and others – have shared. While I am seeking to work hard on your behalf as your interim pastor, I also recognize that when all is completed here, it is my hope that we will all be able to recognize a job well done; that our goals for the Interim Ministry Time will have been accomplished; and that this faith community will be better prepared for a vital future than it was before we agreed to be in ministry together. Maybe James and John were not just asking to be placed in a seat of honor. Maybe they also were seeking to be recognized for the work that they had done, for all the sacrifices they had made, and for the challenges they did know lay ahead.

Now, however, we need to hear the response of Jesus to James and John's request. After chastising them for their unwillingness to hear what he has been saying and for their lack of understanding; he again tries to teach them about what lies ahead. He says, *"The cup that I drink you will drink; and with the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized;"* (Mark 10: 39b) Just as we learned from the sufferings of Job and our own sufferings, this decision the disciples made - and we have made today - to follow Jesus includes accompanying Jesus in his suffering and death. Then, for at least the third week in our recent lectionary texts from the Gospel of Mark, Jesus helps us to see the coming kingdom of God in a new light. Jesus says, *"but 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 Promised One came not to be served but to serve..."* (Mark 10: 44-45) If there is any person who walked on this earth who deserves to be exalted, it was Jesus. Yet, throughout his life, his ministry and even unto the cross, Jesus did not demonstrate pride and ambition. He did not seek to be acknowledged for all his accomplishments. Rather, in Mark's Gospel in particular, he often tells the disciples and the crowds following him not to tell anyone of his miraculous works.

Jesus clearly calls us today to be servants – to be slave of all - to serve the needs of others. Jesus clearly calls this faith community to continue to provide and even to deepen our outreach efforts in ways that will both directly meet the needs of others and will address the issues of injustice in our society that are the root causes for the suffering of so many in our communities and in our world. I am truly excited by the wonderful work that is being done in our "Living into our mission and vision" small groups. I celebrate with you all the service that has been done throughout the history of this church.

I will close today's sermon, with one simple message. The only way that this faith community can successfully serve in all the ministries we are doing or will do in the future – the only way we can live out Jesus' call to be servant to all - is if each one of us prayerfully considers increasing our financial gifts to this church – to the extent that we are able. This week you all should have received a letter in the mail asking you to make your 2016 financial pledge. You have heard and will hear testimonies from members sharing why they feel called to give with abundance and generosity. May each of us prayerfully consider our pledges during this time.

God promises us through the story of Job, through the story of James and John and through the actions and words of Jesus, that when we give we shall also receive. We shall receive

the faith that we seek. We shall receive God's love. Our community of faith shall become strengthened beyond even what we might envision. May it be so. Amen.