

St. Andrew's Cathedral
Jackson, Mississippi
Sermon for October 21, 2018 ~ Proper 24B
The Very Reverend Ronald D. Pogue

Over the course of my life as an ordained minister, I have had many experiences with mission statements. I have gone to congregations that had them. I have facilitated the process of writing mission statements in several places. Some of the mission statements were brilliant, guiding our life and witness, providing us with values and standards that held us accountable and kept us on track. Some of them were not so helpful, but when the Bishop asked we could always point to the framed copy on the wall and the text on the website. “Yep! We’ve got a mission statement.”

Here at St. Andrew’s, we have a mission statement. Allow me to read it to you:

The Cathedral Parish of St. Andrew is the mother church of the Episcopal Diocese of Mississippi and the Seat of its Bishop. Living into our baptismal covenant, we promise to respect the dignity of every human being. We are a unifying center of authentic faith, diversity, intellectual discovery, and community leadership.

Our theology supports the values of community, hospitality, education, pastoral care, evangelism, outreach, and resource development. These values undergird our mission, which is to provide an environment where everyone might know and experience the unconditional love of God in Jesus Christ.

Shortly after I arrived in August of last year, I learned that the Vestry felt that this mission statement needed updating and revising. Honestly, during the past year it seems to me that the Vestry and just about everybody else around here has been too busy engaging in the mission of the Cathedral to stop and try to write a succinct description of it. The Vestry will eventually set aside the time to draft a new mission statement. In the meantime, we’ll work with the one we have.

Today’s gospel is a good reminder that there is also such a thing as a mission question. In fact, maybe mission *questions* should precede mission *statements*. Like a mission statement, a mission question can guide our lives. When looking at James and John in this scene, we can surmise the question that guides their lives, that leads them into this embarrassing attempt to curry favor with Jesus and ask for special status. Their mission question is, “What’s in it for me?”

We have sympathy for these sons of Zebedee because we’ve seen how they left their fishing business and their father to follow Jesus. We’ve seen that they have sacrificed a lot to continue with Jesus down this road of discipleship. But today we see that ugly question, rearing its self-centered head: *what’s in it for me?*

The response of Jesus to their question is another question and one that would one day replace their question. In the gospel account we read, “James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came forward to Jesus and said to him, ‘Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you.’ And he said to them, ‘What is it you want me to do for you?’”

This is the question Jesus always asks. In fact, we'll hear Jesus ask it again in next week's gospel when he'll ask a blind beggar, "What is it you want me to do for you?" And that blind man will ask for healing. This is Jesus' question for all who come to him. This is Jesus' open, vulnerable mission question – a question that guides his life of service, of his willingness to meet us where we are and to permit us the freedom to tell him what we really want. Sometimes our requests are childish like James' and John's. And sometimes, Jesus hears the honest requests of those who know that he is our only hope: requests for healing, forgiveness, a second or third or fourth chance, a chance to try again, a chance to come before Jesus empty-handed and like that blind beggar say, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me." And Jesus responds, "What do you want me to do for you?"

When the other disciples hear that James and John have put themselves above their peers, they run up to Jesus too. They're angry. And not because they see that James and John have misunderstood. They're mad because they didn't think of it first. They're angry because they think of power the way the world thinks of power – as something that's yours if you take it, if you're the strongest, swiftest, most politically savvy, most well connected, most affluent. They think there's only so much to go around, and those sneaky Zebedee brothers have gone and grabbed the power first.

Jesus' strategy was to form a community of disciples. He did so in order to teach them, to form them, to prepare them to carry on his mission after he was gone. So, Jesus seized upon this kerfuffle among those disciples and used it as an opportunity to help them see his way more clearly. Jesus called them and said to them, "You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. But it is not so among you; 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 Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many." And that right there is all summed up in the mission question of Jesus: "What is it you want me to do for you?"

That's the mission question you and I must learn to ask as we follow Jesus. Before we ever start composing a mission statement, we need to allow Jesus to transform our mission questions so that we are people who ask not, "*What's in it for me?*" but, "*What is it you want me to do for you?*" That question is a mark of discipleship.

Rick Warren is the Pastor of Saddleback Valley Church in California. He is the author of several books, including *The Purpose Driven Life*. In a television interview several years ago, he reflected upon how he and some other evangelical leaders had figured out how to use secular marketing principles to grow churches. They were very successful at it and have taught others how use those principles to grow churches. But in this interview he had this confession to make. "On Sunday mornings, when I look out across my congregation, I see a lot of consumers, but very few disciples."

You see, the question of the Zebedee brothers, "What's in it for me?" is the question of those who see their place in the Church as consumers of Christianity. They think they are the customers. Disciples, on the other hand, ask "What can I do for you?" They understand themselves as the church staff! And they devote themselves to the service of others. They come here week by week to receive divine resources, not just to be consoled, but in order to be renewed, refreshed, and refueled for their life of service in the mission field at our doorstep. They receive the Sacrament in order to become a sacrament of God's love in a hurting world.