

*A sermon for the Parish of the Epiphany in Winchester, Massachusetts, preached by the rector, the Reverend Thomas James Brown, on Sunday, 18 October 2009, in lectionary year B, proper 23, based upon Mark 10:17-34.*

I'll start this morning with a somewhat peculiar question. "Why are you here?" It's odd, I know that. But why do we come to this place? There are all kinds of factors for the decision we made to get here this morning.

Some of us are here because we value community and friendship. Many of us are here because we're committed to making the world a better, more peaceful, more just place, and Epiphany has lots of ways to do that transforming work. Some of us are here because we want our children to have faith, or at least that's what initially drew us, but now that we're here and they're here, we've discovered there is absolutely something about Christianity that's right. Many of us are here because there's power in worship, in music, and there's strength and comfort in prayer.

Those faithful reasons, and there are many more than the ones I just listed, aren't the only motivators, though, are they? It's true that some of us are here because we wouldn't mind being in charge of something, and we can hear ourselves saying, "if they would just listen to me" or "I told them that wouldn't work."

James and John were looking for recognition and glory and a place of privilege. "Hey" they say to Jesus, "let one of us be on your right and the other on the left. We'd make a great team. Pick me. Pick me." Jesus responds by saying, "you don't know what you're asking."

Suddenly we can picture ourselves standing there with James and John hearing Jesus say, "you don't know what you're asking" because sometimes it's self-interest that motivates us. And the church itself perpetuates this self-interest when we ask for commitments of time and money; sometimes we don't really know what we're asking.

James and John asked for a position they thought they wanted, or needed. Jesus knew them better than they knew themselves, and he knows us in that same way too. And so he gives us something, but like James and John, it might not be that for which we're asking.

The something is a gift. Jesus gives us the never-ending, always-renewing, constantly-energizing gift of generosity. For some the gift is displayed easily, whereas for others, being generous is a constant struggle. Regardless, obligation or requirement or guilt or expectation have nothing to do with generosity. Jesus gives us a spirit of generosity that helps us throw duty to the wind, and then to catch instead joy and laughter.

The generous life turns from calculating how much we can give, and turns toward thanking God for all that we have. Everything is God's. All of it. Our abundant thanks for our generous lives blesses us to give a portion--not the whole thing by any means--but a portion, back to God. Portions of ourselves, our time and talents, and our money.

The generous life means we look into the mirror and see how beloved we are. God gives life and blesses it; God accompanies us when our life is challenged and yes, even when it's broken. God is the ultimate generous one, who created us in the image of generosity, and by her will they were created, and we have our being.

Today each of us will receive a letter asking you to commit to giving of yourself and of your money to this parish. There is a pledge card too. The pledge card itself is far more important than you might think. It's an outward and visible sign of your intention to be here. Whether you increase your contribution,

decrease it, or don't make any financial commitment, returning your pledge card is the way to say "I belong here, and I'm thankful!"

In the envelope with your pledge card there is additional information, and some of that information focuses on the 2010 budget. What the envelope doesn't contain are the powerful stories of people's journey with generosity, and their transformation because of the music program, or the YPF, or our outward mission. So please stay for the adult class to hear your sisters and brothers tell their stories, and to hear one another's questions. At the end, all of us will receive an overview of the important role our pledges play to achieve our mission. But in this liturgy, I'm asking us to focus more on Christ's gift of generosity, than on the reasons we're here, or the programs we provide.

James and John, ourselves, and the church, don't always know what we're asking for. But we can be sure of the question Jesus asks: "Are you able?" Are you able to accept the cup of generosity and the water of thanksgiving?

I'm deeply honored to join you in this year's annual commitment program. Your generosity has already inspired mine, and I look forward to leading the way on All Saints Sunday in giving back to God. This is a great--actually it's a fabulous--outpost of God's commonwealth. And your generosity begets mine.

Taste and see the evidence that Jesus has already made us generous. We can be reasonably sure that we won't be placed either on Christ's right or his left, but we will be placed where Jesus sends us, next to that person who is also generous, and most definitely in this place, where Jesus leads us into transformation and onto paths of unending joy.