

Twenty-first Sunday after Pentecost
Wicker Park Lutheran Church
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The ancient Greeks used to tell a story about an even more ancient society of Phrygia, in modern day Turkey, and a king who ruled there. This king had an insatiable desire for one thing, riches, and more specifically gold. I'm guessing that most of you have heard of this king. His name was King Midas. I know this story is probably not new, but humor me for a minute as I retell the story, trying to shed new light on this old tale. This King Midas, according to one version of the story by the Roman poet Ovid, had found favor with the god Bacchus, god of vineyards and wine. And it was Bacchus who offered the King a single wish. This is the ultimate party game question right? If you had one wish what would it be? Oh and you can't wish for more wishes, that defeats the point. But seriously, you have one wish. What do you wish for?

Midas wanted the ability to turn everything he touched into gold: piece of dirt, gold; a twig from a tree, gold; his clothes, more gold. As the story goes, King Midas did not realize the error of his ways until he sat down at a huge feast his servants had prepared for him to celebrate his new amazing gift. And as he sat dreaming of all of the things he would like to turn to gold in his life he picked up a loaf of bread. And bringing the loaf to his mouth and then biting down, his teeth clinked. The bread was gold. All of a sudden realizing the potential disaster he had before him Midas quickly grabbed his wine goblet. He mixed the wine with the purest water he could find and then brought the goblet up to his mouth to take a drink. Ovid tells us that "molten gold could be seen trickling through his lips." Attempting to literally run from his problems, King Midas fled out of his palace and into the woods. Now in the woods, his mouth desperate for thirst quenching water, he lifts his golden hands to the heavens and cries out, "Father, Bacchus, forgive me! I have sinned. Have pity on me, I beg you, and save me from this costly evil!" The god Bacchus hears Midas's plea and removes his wish, which had become a curse.

And according to some accounts of the story Midas, now hating all wealth, lived the rest of his life in the woods, fields, and caves around the kingdom he once ruled.

What is it about the story of King Midas that has allowed it to stand the test of time? Out of all the ancient myths that are nothing but an afterthought in the modern imagination why do we remember this myth? What eternal truth in our human condition does it speak to? I'm sure many of you could have stood up here and hit the main points of this story without much difficulty. You probably could have rattled off some iteration of the following: there was a king whose name was Midas, and he wished for everything he touched to turn to gold. And you could conclude with facts that this a really bad idea. For instance, what happens if you want to eat something or hug someone?

The general idea of the story is in our minds. And from that general idea we still get the age old moral or lesson attached to it. And the moral of the story is, "Be careful what you wish for, because you might just get it." Or condensed down even further the moral of the story is, sometimes "you [really] do not know what you are asking for?" Our greatest desires for happiness, success, power, money, self-worth, are sometimes pretty shortsighted like Midas's.

And this brings us back to our Gospel story for today. Mark's 10th chapter from verses 35-45 starts out very similarly to the King Midas story. There were two disciples of Jesus, James and John, the sons of Zebedee. As these two brothers walked with the other disciples to Jerusalem they asked Jesus if he could fulfill their greatest desire. Jesus asked them what that might be, and the two brothers responded, "Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory." But instead of granting them their request right then and there, like Bacchus did for Midas, Jesus asked some follow up questions to really make sure that this is what they really want. Like Midas, James and John didn't understand the full extent of their desire. When Midas asked for the golden touch he could not see what the reality of this power would be. Jesus is trying to save James and John from this disappointment by letting them know that their wish, if fulfilled, would not be what they expected.

Do any of you remember the old TV show fantasy island on NBC? I don't really. The original show went off the air 5 years before I was born. Although there was a year, 1998, when it was remade for one season. And I saw a few of those episodes. And from what I saw every episode seemed to have the same point. A person goes to Fantasy Island and his or her greatest desire, greatest wish, is met. And every single time, the fantasy or wish turns out differently than what they expected, often horribly. And it's because the person could not see the true consequences their wish would have on them and the people around them.

The moral of the show Fantasy Island is the same sentiment that we heard before "be careful what you wish for, cause you might just get it." And if you look harder, you can find this moral in other unexpected places. And if you don't believe me yet let me tell you that this exact phrase "be careful what you wish for, cause you might just get it," can be found in the lyrics of a song sung by the dance pop group the Pussycat Dolls, another from rapper Eminem, and from country star Christ Daughtry. This just goes to show that if the Pussycat Dolls, Eminem, Daughtry, NBC, the roman poet Ovid, and the Bible all use this theme in their work, it must be important. It must be something that we really need to hear.

But what does it mean that Jesus uses this in the 10th chapter of Mark? What is Jesus trying to tell James and John and tell us when he tells them "they do not know what they are asking for?" What is Jesus getting at when he tells James and John to be careful what they wish for, because if they really knew what they were asking for, they might not like it as much as they thought they would? As Jews of the first century, who were living under foreign rule and had been kicked around by empire after empire for centuries and centuries, James and John would have hoped and wished that Jesus as Messiah, as Savior, would come and conquer the powers of this world by creating a new earthly kingdom of God over the tyrants of the earth. And if that was going to happen, then James and John wanted to be with Jesus when it did. "Jesus," they wish, "when you come into your glory, we want to be there with you. We want to see the look on their faces." But where is Jesus when he comes into his glory? Where is Jesus when he conquers the powers of sin and death in the world? Jesus is not where James and John think he will be, on a throne in a palace in

Jerusalem. On the contrary, Jesus says “the son of man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” Jesus’ glory is found on the least likely of places, on the cross. Jesus is telling James and John to be careful what they ask for, because he is pretty sure that this is not type of glory that they are seeking. And let’s not point fingers at James and John, to anyone with ears to hear, dying on a cross, as an enemy of the state, does not sound like glory or wish fulfillment.

But that’s the power of the cross, isn’t it? The cross is the place where we realize that everything that we know about the world, including our wishes and wants, is subverted, turned upside down. On the cross our most selfish wishes and desires are exposed for what they are, human attempts at glory. And that’s a good thing. The subversive power of the cross means that God is not some kind of wish granting genie. The cross as a source of liberating power doesn’t make sense to human minds, and that’s a good thing because it means God isn’t a politician who says that he or she will grant our wishes if we give our vote. The cross isn’t about wish fulfillment, because even James and John never would have wished for Jesus to die on the cross. The cross isn’t about our wish fulfillment it’s about salvation. And salvation is not something we wish for or deserve, but salvation is something that has happened because God loves us. That’s the subversive power of the cross.

It doesn’t make sense according to the norms or the conventions of this world. It’s a new way of looking at the world. It’s on the cross where ruling means serving, where glory is reserved for the slave and the servant, and the poor, and the oppressed, and the hated. It’s on the cross where the Son of Man takes his place before the world, not on a throne of gold or in a gilded cathedral or in the halls of congress, as we would wish him to be, but on a cross of wood.

The knowledge of this type of glory makes James and John’s wish as foolish as wishing for a golden touch. The knowledge of this type of glory makes a trip to Fantasy Island seem very undesirable. The knowledge of this type of glory is what we call grace. And we don’t have to wish for this glory, because grace is something that we already have from God. Amen.