Sunday, October 20, 1991
ARE YOU WILLING TO PAY THE PRICE?
Mark 10:35-45

They missed the point earlier, and now they missed the point again. Jesus overheard them arguing among themselves about which one of them was the greatest. Who was number one? Which of them was the favorite? Who would get the biggest reward or the largest bonus? After all, they were near the center of power, closer to Jesus than anyone, yet they continually misunderstood his ministry. They had to be reminded that, according to God's way of evaluating people, "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all."

That's easy to forget because the world they lived in, and the world we live in today, doesn't ordinarily rank people that way. If you want to be first in this world, you've got to be first of all, not last, and certainly not a servant. Those who are considered first, who are number one, have the largest number of people serving them. Or they are the wealthiest, or the most glamorous, or they are perceived to have a lot of power over others. They have influence in high places.

These two disciples knew that one of the best ways to get a position of power and influence is to have someone powerful appoint you to such a post. So James and John, who were brothers, had the boldness to come privately to Jesus and say, "Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you." What would your answer be if someone came to you and said, "Will you do for me whatever I ask?" I suspect your experience is the same as mine. There are times when someone asks me, "Will you do me a favor?" And not having any idea of what the person might request, I'm a little hesitant to quickly answer, "Yes."

And yet many of our prayers are meant that way. We pray, "God, do for me whatever I ask. Give me what I think I need." In so asking, we are expecting God to fit into our plans rather than us fitting into God's plans. We want God to do our will rather than searching for God's will and following it.

Instead of quickly agreeing to their request or denying it, Jesus asked a good follow-up question: "What is it you want me to do for you?" Although in this case, I think Jesus probably knew what they were going to request. This was a question that Jesus frequently posed. Sometimes before healing an individual, he asked, "Do you want to be healed?" or "What is it you desire?" It is never a superfluous question, even if we think we know what the request is going to be. To have someone clearly define exactly what it is he or she wants is very important. I've often found it very useful to ask individuals when they come to me for help or even to complain, "What can I do specifically to be of help to you?" It enables, it often compels individuals to explore and discover what their real desires are.

The two disciples answered Jesus' follow-up question. They said, "Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory." In other words, "We want to be your very top chief assistants. We want to have almost as much power and glory as you are going to have."

Isn't it true that many times, like these two disciples, we ask for things we think we want without thinking through the implications of what we are asking or what the ramifications might be if our request is granted? Every time we pray the Lord's Prayer, we pray, "Thy Kingdom come." Do we know what we're praying for? I know one person who prayed, "Thy Kingdom come," and under his breath, he said, "But not yet."

Jesus warned the two disciples, “You do not know what you are asking, what the price is that you have to pay. Do you think you can go through the pain and suffering that I’m going to experience? Are you willing to pay the price?” “Oh, sure,” they replied. “We can do it.”

The son of a Welsh mining family had not wanted to go into the mines as his brothers had, but instead joined the British Navy and spent many years touring the world. When he came home once from his travels, he showed his father a shriveled-up monkey’s paw he had gotten in Egypt. The legend was that if one held this paw and made any three wishes, they would come true. However, the son had also been warned not to use it because everyone who had used it before had experienced tragedy. He said, “I’ve decided this warning is right, and I’m going to throw it into the fire.”

However, the father was intrigued by the story and took hold of the charm and said, “I wish more than anything else in the world that I had a two-hundred-pound note at this moment.” No sooner had the words left his lips than there was a knock on the door, and the father went to answer it. There stood a representative of the mining company. He said, “Your son has just been killed in an explosion underground, and it is company policy to give a two-hundred-pound note to the family of such victims to cover the burial expenses. Here it is. I’m sorry.” On hearing this, the father, still holding the monkey’s paw, began to weep loudly, “Oh no, oh no! Bring me back my son, bring me my son. I did not want the money at his expense.” Again, there was a knock on the door, and there stood four miner friends carrying the mutilated body of his son who had just been killed. “Oh no, take him away, I cannot bear the sight of my own flesh and blood now dead.” And so the friends turned away and went to bury him privately. All three of the father’s wishes had come true, yet none of them in the way he expected.

Are you willing to pay the price? To do the right thing is not always easy. To achieve a worthy goal takes discipline and endurance. Are you willing to pay the price? It’s a question that applies to all of life. Do you want to be an outstanding athlete? It takes years of training. Are you willing to pay the price? Do you want to become a concert pianist? Are you willing to pay the price? Do you want to serve human beings in the same way as Mother Teresa? Are you willing to pay the price?

Carl Lewis, after he won the gold medal in the 1984 Olympics, was asked how many years he’d spent developing his tremendous skills. He replied, “The day I stopped crawling, I took up running.”

The ceiling of the Sistine Chapel in Rome was painted by Michelangelo. This required him to lie flat on his back. But that posed a problem, for Michelangelo had a “bad back,” and if he lay on it long, he suffered excruciating pain. Moreover, he had some kind of nasal obstruction that cut off much of his air supply when he lay on his back. So what? He lay on his back all day, every day, for 20 months. He often slept with his clothes on so he could go back to work without losing time in dressing. And he painted one of the great masterpieces of all time.

In 1949, an unknown scientist started work seeking a cure for a devastating disease known as polio. He worked 16 to 18 hours a day, six days a week, for five years. The ultimate discovery of a polio vaccine by Dr. Jonas Salk came about because he was willing to pay the price.

There are no easy ways to acquire excellence in any field. We must be willing to pay the price, and the price is inner discipline and endurance. It’s no accident that the word “discipline” comes from the word “disciple,” meaning to follow a certain way or teacher.

Isn't it true that we live in a time when too many people expect overnight success? We want instant wealth, instant success, instant stardom, quick promotions, fast growth, speedy solutions to our problems, and even instant maturity.

On the other hand, there are many people that I admire very much because of what they have been able to do with their God-given abilities. They are what I would define as successful, not because of the amount of money they make or have made, but because they are fulfilling their potential. They have a sense of direction and purpose in their lives. They are happy in the best sense of the word. What I have noticed above all else is that all of these individuals possess the character quality of discipline. They are willing to pay the price, and they have a joy and sense of fulfillment that can be gotten in no other way. A synonym for discipline, the way I'm using it here, is commitment. Are you willing to follow through? Are you willing to follow me to the end? That's what Jesus was asking the two disciples.

And then I've known other people who have had a successive string of setbacks and failures in the distant or recent past and who do not have a sense of direction or purpose in their lives. If you asked them, "What happened?" they would probably offer you a very candid appraisal as to why some of these calamities have come their way. They would say such things as, "I started to let things slide. I got careless. I didn't follow through. I lacked endurance. I stopped doing my homework one day. I started missing classes. I didn't get to work on time. I didn't follow up on the project. I didn't keep my eye on the store. I became complacent. I stopped making my calls. I didn't take care of myself. I thought problems would solve themselves. I neglected my spiritual nourishment."

Are you willing to pay the price? Our Christian faith reminds us that the qualities that make for a good beginning are not the same as those qualities of character that see things through to the end.

"Do you want to be great? Very well — here is the way to be great: Be the servant of all," said Jesus. I know many people who pray for happiness. Very well. If that is what you really want, and want strongly enough to meet the cost, you can have it. But here are some of the costs: an escape from the prison of self, a childlike trust in God, a losing of self in a cause bigger than self, so that your life does not spin around either your aches or pains or your gratifications but finds a new center.

God said to the people of Israel, and God continually says to you and me, "I have set before you life and death; therefore choose life." Many people delude themselves into believing they can achieve their dreams by simply asking someone else to do something for them instead of making the hard decisions and then following through on their own. And yet deciding is the most God-like quality the Creator has given us. Being created in God's image means we have the ability and the responsibility to choose. Being willing to pay the price means being willing to make the hard choices and then to follow through. It also means being willing to give rather than only receive.

Have you noticed that no person has ever been honored for what he or she received or already had? Even among people who do not admit knowing God or say that they don't believe in God, honor has been the reward for what people give, not for what they have received. No wonder Jesus said, "It is more blessed to give than to receive."

Jesus knew that the trouble with the request of James and John was that they wanted power for the sake of power. They wanted to sit on his right and left hand so they could glory in their power. Furthermore, they wanted Jesus simply to give it to them. Too many people in every age have sought power for power's sake. They want to show off their power by exercising it over others. The twelve disciples faced that temptation, even as we face it.

"But," said Jesus, "That's not the way the power of God operates in the world, in our lives, and in our relationships." There is a kind of powerlessness that Jesus exhibited that is the most powerful of all. That's the kind of power he offered to James and John and the other ten disciples and which he offers to us. Are you willing to pay the price? And when we are willing to pay the price, in spite of the hard work, even the suffering that may come, we experience a deep sense of joy and accomplishment that can come in no other way. Amen.