

“A Demanding Faith”

a sermon by

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**Text: “Whoever wishes to be first among you must be your slave.”
Matthew 20:27**

60 Minutes ran a story a few years ago called “The Age of the Millennials.” It was so popular that they ran it a second time last May. The point of the episode is that a new generation of workers called Millennial, or GenerationY, have entered the workforce and they are causing people to scratch their head and wonder how to deal with the children of the Baby Boomers.

Millennials are bringing with them a new worldview regarding technology, work ethic, community, relationships. Companies like Google and Zappos.com are embracing these new workers, while more established managers cannot quite figure out how to handle them.

One of the most interesting reports from this story was when the reporter said, “Dear old mom isn’t just your landlord, she is your agent as well. Career services departments are complaining about the parents who are coming to update their child’s resume. And in fact, you go to the employers, and they’re starting to express concern now with the parents who will phone HR saying, ‘but my little Susie or Johnny didn’t get the performance evaluation that I think they deserve.’”¹

As one of the young adults stated “our parents really took from us that opportunity to fall down on our face and learn how to stand up.”

There is something to be learned from the process of falling down, of stumbling over our feet and learning how to respond to demands others place upon us. Yet, there is also something in us that is more interested in protecting ourselves from these struggles, stumbles, and external demands.

It is far easier to make our list of demands known, then to accept the demands someone else places upon us.

Now, we may be quick to complain about the young adults of today, but it is interesting to notice how this same attitude is apparent in scripture.

¹ “The Age of Millennials” *60 Minutes*,
<http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2007/11/08/60minutes/main3475200.shtml> <accessed on 5/9/2009>

Does not the mother of James and John have the same attitude as those mother's calling HR departments? She comes to Jesus to demand that her children get the best seat. She wants the best for her children. Yet, this is not limited to mothers, for we all do this...we all want the best for our lives.

It is interesting to note that Matthew is the only Gospel that has the mother of the Zebedee boys say this. Mark (10:35ff) reports that John and James are bold enough to demand this from Jesus.

Like each of us, they have this desire to get spots of privilege and prestige; to get the good reviews from our bosses; to get the best seats. It just so happened that in Matthew's gospel it is the mother who gets to do the dirty work.

So whether it is from their mother or from themselves, James and John take a list of demands from God. And likewise we do the same thing: Demand things of God, yet rarely are we willing to accept his demands for us, thinking that we are somehow an exception.

This is what we see with the sons of Zebedee. Clearly this family would have been of some note. James and John's parents are the only parents of disciples who show up in the Bible. And most of the time that the boys are named they are referenced as Zebedee's sons. James and John can never quite escape their family shadows.

We first encounter them in Matthew 4 when Jesus calls to them while they are fishing with their father to come and follow him. And they leave their boat and their father mending his nets.

Then we hear about them with Peter, as they are the only other disciples to have witnessed the transfiguration; so they have gotten to be at Jesus right and left hand to see some pretty amazing things.

Yet, as Jesus heads towards Jerusalem, and has just told all 12 of the disciples that the Son of Man will be crucified and killed, James and John's mother shows up with her sons to talk to Jesus.

Some of translations say, "she asked a favor of him..." but it can also be translated, "she demanded something of him." And she boldly tells Jesus, the Son of God..."Declare that these two sons of mine will sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your kingdom." She wanted her boys to have the seats of power. And she demanded it.

Now, maybe, the boys were embarrassed by her mother's request, but you can pick up their air of entitlement because Jesus then turns to the boys and says "Are you able to drink this cup that I am about to drink?"

In other words, he is saying, "remember how just a few minutes ago I talked about how the Son of Man is going to be flogged, mocked, beaten, crucified—is that the seat of power you want?"

James and John respond—"We are able." A little too self-assured, a little too confident.

Their selfishness immediately caused dissension within the disciples within the community.

That is the problem with making demands, its impact on others is of little interest. All James and John care about was that they get the special privilege and have the power seats. The impact it had upon their community was not a consideration.

It is our natural human tendency to be concerned about our needs. That comes instinctual and natural. Putting the needs of others first, however, takes a transformation; takes work; takes faith that God will support us while we care for others.

This is what Jesus tells the disciples in response to their greedy grab for power. He tells them what the demands of faith will require of them. He says, “indeed you will drink my cup, but you will not be granted these places of privilege at my right and left hand. Much will be expected of you, but you will not profit for your ministry and service to Christ. In actuality service to Jesus Christ means that you are willing not to be first but to be a servant. You must become my slave. All your work and toil is not for your benefit but for the Lord’s.”

The term “slave” does not mean forced, hereditary labor, but rather sole devotion. That we become solely devoted to God.

In our American culture of freedom, we have a hard time digesting these demands of God. The truth is: We are not free. We are actually servants and slaves to Jesus Christ. We are not autonomous individuals; we are part of a community solely devoted to God.

Jesus tells James and John that the world, the Gentile community creates Lords and Tyrants, but that the church in contrast creates servants and slaves.

How true that is for our world, where we want to be the Lord’s of our lives, and have God and church fit nicely into the other extracurricular activities that already clutter our schedules.

We come to God with our demands, just like James and John and their mother. They stood before the Son of God and had the boldness to tell him what to do: “Jesus we want this from you!”

Do we not make similar demands of God?

We want our prayers to be answered, our loved ones to be healed, happy marriages. We want programs for our children, we want to be entertained, we show up with our personal agendas and personal needs to see if God will bend to our demands. And if not we will move on and find a god who will.

Now these agendas are at times noble and good, and appropriate to ask God for, but we must also be willing to accept God’s demands back on us—as he asks James and John...to take this cup and drink it?

The cup of Christ. The cup of his death, the one we drink from at the communion table that unites us as one body...to be his body. As Paul says, “I no longer live, but Christ lives in me.”

That we let go of what we want, and seek to serve God in what he wants from us.

As a result we feel the strange pull of a god who makes demands on our life; we bristle wondering who this is to demand something of us. We are not used to people demanding anything of us, let alone to these extremes.

We figure joining the Body of Christ is just like joining any other volunteer association.

A great, but also strange thing happened to the church when it came to America. As the second great awakening arose across the country, faith involvement became

voluntary. Voluntary societies around Mission, Education, the Bible started to crop up as an extension of the local church.

As the frontier expanded, churches were sparse and so faith became less communal and more individual.

Over time our culture has moved into a more individualistic society. Creating the challenge that faith has become yet another market industry where we can pick and choose our level of involvement. The sheer number of bible studies, fellowships groups, spiritual podcasts, books, and ideas available to us, make it easy to make faith convenient. To create a god who will abide by our demands.

Sociologist Wade C. Roof calls this a cafeteria style faith. Where we pick the pieces of Christianity that sound the most palatable to us but leave the other stuff alone. But isn't the stuff we avoid on the buffet table usually the stuff that's actually good for us—like spinach?

Robert Jensen, a professor at University of Texas, wrote an interesting article a few years back called, "Why I am a Christian (Sort Of)."

"I don't believe in God,

I don't believe Jesus Christ was the son of God that I don't believe in,
nor do I believe Jesus rose from the dead to ascend to a heaven that I
don't believe exist.

Given this position, this year I did the only thing that seemed sensible: I formally joined a Christian church.

Standing before the congregation of St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church, I affirmed that I endorsed the core principles of Christ's teaching...

So I'm a Christian, sort of."²

He goes on to write that "my decision to join a church was more a political than a theological act." Arguing that he was interested in being involved in a group of people doling out his understanding of universal love.

His interest in joining the community was in how it could enhance what he wanted thought the world needed.

Yet the irony is that he says that he stood before the congregation to endorse the core principles of Christ's teaching... which he had determined to be his understanding of "universal love." This is just like the disciples, and their mother who reduced Christ's core principal to be about power. Robert Jensen missed the core principal of Jesus's teachings.

Jesus's core principal is his life, death and resurrection, it is only through knowing the depths of pain, death, sin and suffering and the good news that Jesus Christ bore all of this for us, that his love and power makes any sense.

Through falling on our faces, through heartache, brokenness, failing do we discover the good news. What the mothers who call the HR departments are wanting their kids to avoid—disappointment and failure—are actually agents of God's Good news, be we see that God's love for us is real. Friends, family, jobs may leave and disappoint us, but God remains.

² Robert Jensen, "Why I am a Christian, Sort of." *Alternet.com*, <http://www.alternet.org/story/33236>.
<accessed 2006>

It is because we see the demands God put upon his Son, do we understand the demands of our faith. For as Jesus says:

Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me.³

God's demands that before all other obligations we be willing to take up the cross and follow him. Not to lead, but to follow him.

The person who came the closest to understanding the fullness of this demand of God was Abraham. Abraham was one small movement away from killing his son when God intervened. God stopped the knife, because God knew that it was only the sacrifice of God's son that would be sufficient. Yet God allowed Abraham to go through the personal torment of marching his son off to the mount. God demands faithfulness.

Put that in contrast to the mother of James and John; with Abraham we see a man who was so devoted to God, willing to heed the demands of God that he was faithful to an extreme that most of us would not even dare consider.

This story is perhaps one of the most important stories in the old testament because it shows us that by Faith Abraham knew that God's demands preceded his desires. It shows us a person who rather than bringing a list of demands to God, was accepting of God's demands upon him.

And this story causes us great discomfort because we do not want to believe that God could have such high demands for his people. That he would call Abraham to go through such emotional upheaval seems cruel. And while it may have scarred Abraham, it also changed Abraham and the world forever. For through Abraham's lineage comes Jesus Christ. It is precisely because Isaac was spared that the family tree sprouted Jesus Christ.

Yet this does not diminish the emotional struggle Abraham would have faced because he had been demanded so much by God.

That is the challenge we are called to struggle with...For we may demand much from our faith—happiness, health, heaven, wholeness. But the truth is God is not interested in our list of demands. Rather he is interested in demanding much of us.

He demands that we follow Him. As he told James, John and their mother, he demands that "whoever wishes to be first among you must be your slave, just as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many."

Christ's death was the ransom for the list of demands we want.

Christ's death was sufficient for all of our needs.

It sets us free, it restores our lives.

It brings us hope; it is the good news.

But it is news that does not leave us where we are.

It demands that we go and do something with our life for God.

A life of faith is not convenient it is demanding.

Perhaps we are wondering what precisely we are to do?

³ Matthew 10:37-38.

Unfortunately God is not one for simple checklists and acronyms. His demands go deeper than we may assume them to be about worship, prayer and quiet time. They are about how we treat other people (Matthew 5:43ff), how we manage our business transactions (Col 3:23), what words we say (Eph. 4:29), what thoughts we think (Matthew 5:28ff). He demands that all that we are be done to his glory.

So what happens to the Zebedee boys?

Well John becomes the writer of the Gospel of John. Yet if you look through the entire Gospel of John you will never find him mention his name or his brother's name directly. Rather than seeking prestige and fame, John's attitude was radically changed and he was more interested in proclaiming who Jesus was.

James the son of Zebedee, he experienced the extreme demands of faith. As Acts 12 reports, "King Herod laid violent hands upon some who belonged to the church. ² He had James, the brother of John, killed with the sword." Making him the first apostle to be killed.

While we may never experience that demand—to what extent are willing to bear the demands of a faith that testifies to a God who lived with outcasts, ate with sinners, cared for the lonely, was crucified by the powerful, and conquered death and sin for you and I?

Are we willing to live a demanding and faithful life?