**What can *I* do for *you*?**

A sermon by The Rev. Christopher Wendell

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Each year, usually right about now towards the end of October, invariably, I have a “no” week. A no week is when, unless it is absolutely necessary, I find myself saying no whenever anyone asks me to do something. Probably it has to do with the fact that, at the beginning of September, after a nice summer vacation and extended family time, I’m feeling energized and ready to dive back in to the school-year routines of work and church and cleaning and childcare and cleaning and diocesan obligations and cleaning and children’s activities and cleaning. In September I’m ready, even eager to say yes to people, even to be proactive and say, “What can I do for you?” But there comes a points, usually between Columbus Day and Halloween when I’m all done saying yes, and instinctive “no” begins to kick in. Am I the only one who feels this way? If I’m not alone then can I get an Amen?

Church, of course, is as big an offender as anyone in this. Can you help teach Sunday School? We need another tenor for the choir…can you sing? It’d be so great to have a Halloween party, a clothing drive, an adult study series…would you show up, and bring a hot dish? We need baskets and crafts for the Fair…are you good with a glue gun? No? Well there’s this retaining wall we need to fix, could you spend a Saturday lugging concrete pavers? Can you acolyte…on Christmas morning? Do you want to go to Haiti for a week? Would you be a prayer partner for a newly baptized baby for six months? Could you host coffee hour, tomorrow? And could you just, would you think about, might you be free on…. Oh, and yes, we’d love your pledge card by the end of the month.

In one of his letters, St. Paul writes a really useful piece of advice in navigating the onslaught of ways the church asks what you can do for it. He writes: “Let your yes be yes, and your no be no.” Paul’s letters are quite unhelpful on lots of points related to modern living...especially when they have to do with women. But this one is news you can use. Let your yes, really mean yes – let it be a sign not just of compliance, but of commitment, of willingness, of loyalty; a sign that your time, talent and treasure is given to support something you love, and care about and value. And, when necessary, let your no, really be no. Let it be the product of wise and faithful discernment about what is really beyond you at this moment. “No” is not an excuse to live in self-interested way, to shut out any requests that might ask you to stretch, grow or cultivate new depths of faithfulness. Rather, ‘no’ is a tool to help you focus on what matters most to you. When done faithfully, “No” frees you from the trivial, to give your attention to the holy…whether the holy be easy or hard. So both no and yes can be faithful responses when someone asks “Could you do this for me?”

It’d be wrong for me to say that a holy life is free from the obligations of being part of Christian community. The New Testament word for church is ekklesia, which has nothing to do with a building. It simply meant a gathering of faithful people. The Church, the ekklesia, originally meant the coming together of the faithful, of the followers of Jesus’ way. At its orgin, church was a community of people united in mutual support, encouragement and upholding each other in prayer. And to participate in community means to accept both the joys and obligations of a life lived in relationship with others, all struggling together to become creatures of greater holiness, compassion, and love.

Certainly it is true that our faith deepens and matures through our willingness to offer our time, talent and treasure to others. As we say yes and serve each others’ needs, we become more aware of what is truly important, and more willing to let go of the parts of our lives that, it turns out, are actually trivial. And sometimes, through self-offering, we even become able to let go of whatever it is that we cling to most tightly.

But church is a two way street. Sometimes we grow in faith through giving and doing for others. And sometimes, we grow in faith by receiving from others, by being the object of someone else’s care, concern, and delight. The Gospels reminds us that even in those moments when it feels like the church is asking, asking and then asking some more, Jesus is just as concerned with the opposite question. Jesus wants to know, “What do you want God to do for you?” In fact, in today’s Gospel, he basically says exactly those words to Bartimeaus. “What do you want me to do for you?”

It’s a refreshing question because it reminds us that God lives his life for us, just as much as we are asked to live our lives for God. We give and we give and we give….and sometimes it is so helpful to just know that God wants to give back to us, threefold, and tenfold and a hundred fold. Much about God is still a mystery to me. But on this point, I know it’s true. God is infinitely generous, and yearns to be so towards each of us. Towards you.

To enable that generosity, God wants us to know what we desire, and encourages us to ask for what we truly need most. So what is it? What do you want from all this, from God, from church, from the ekklesia – your fellow seekers trying to cultivate a life of greater love. Why, in fact, are you here today? What healing or wisdom or challenge or comfort or inspiration do you seek from the Divine? What do you want God to do for you?

Of course, it can be easy to hear Jesus’ question to Bartimeaus and get struck with, “I want a pony syndrome,” as if God were a genie in a lamp and you were given three wishes. But those of us who have known God for awhile, know that God is not a magician. Nor, alas, is God in the immediate suffering removal business…notwithstanding caves and caves of discarded crutches in various shrines around the world.

But God is in the transformation business. In fact, God has that market cornered. Jesus’ entire ministry both on earth and now in heaven, is devoted to the transformation of all creation. To the bringing of wholeness where there is brokenness. To creating justice and harmony where there is oppression and strife. To integrating that which has become fragmented. To making, as we will hear in next week’s lesson, “all things new”.

Bartimeaus knew exactly how he wanted to be made new. In a moment of deep commitment to that desire, Bartimaeus began shouting for Jesus, literally waving his hands and calling out saying, “this is how I want to change, and grow and be transformed.” And Jesus honored his clarity of thought and the depth of his desire for change. Jesus asked the question because he knew Bartimaeus was ready to answer. He knew what he wanted from God. He knew how he longed to grow and be transformed. Do you? And if you do know, do you accept that your life will change as God companions you through the blessings and challenges of the transformation you seek?

Because here’s the thing. When Jesus touched him and gave him what he sought, that was just the beginning. Jesus wasn’t a one-stop shop for Bartimaeus. After Jesus touched him, he didn’t run back to his old life. He stayed and followed Jesus, even to Jerusalem, even to the place of greatest challenge. When he got what yearned for most deeply he knew that this was just the beginning of transformation. And so he didn’t turn away from Jesus, he turned even closer, knowing that there was still more to receive from God, more than he could ask for or imagine. As one commentator on this story: awareness of his need brought Bartimaeus to Jesus; his healing encounter with Jesus led gratitude; that gratitude led to loyalty; and that loyalty moved him to share in Jesus’ journey of deeper and deeper self-giving.

So it is with us. Our awareness of our need and desire for God brings us here to church. Our encounters with the mystery of God, in the Eucharist, in prayer, in each other, in serving others, bring us healing and gratitude for that healing. Our gratitude for that healing cultivates a loyalty towards God and each other, the ekklesia, the people of God. And our loyalty leads us to journey onward together – with each other and with Jesus – as a community build around offering our lives, our labors, and ourselves, to the service of God’s love for all people. Amen.