

Be Careful What You Ask For

Be careful what you ask for: you just might get it.

The classic case, of course, is the story of King Midas. You remember the tale – a greedy, miserly old soul who had an inordinate lust for gold. He made a wish that everything he touched would turn to the precious metal. His wish was granted, and it was the death of him. For not only those things that he wanted to transform turned to gold, but everything. His hands touched bread, and it turned to gold. His parched lips sipped water, and it turned to gold. He got his wish, and it killed him.

I have my own little *be careful what you ask for: you just might get it* story. It was my fifteen minutes of national fame. The year was 1987, and I was pastor of a congregation in Roanoke. Oral Roberts, the televangelist, had just made the outrageous claim that a 900' tall Jesus had appeared to him in a vision and told him that if his followers did not raise a million dollars by the first of the year, then the Lord was going to “call Oral Roberts home.” It was a sort of stewardship-by-extortion gimmick.

At our congregation's annual meeting, I mocked this piece of religious hucksterism by telling the members that the previous evening, I had had a phone call from Oral Roberts' brother, Nasal Roberts. Nasal had had a vision, too. And in that vision he said that the congregation was to give me a Mercedes Benz by the first of April, or the Lord was going to call our associate pastor home. I reminded the congregation that our associate pastor was from New Jersey, and we couldn't let that happen. So, if you love him, wontcha please give?

It was a lighthearted piece of January humor, soon forgotten . . . by all but a few of the members. Because when I awoke on the morning of April 1, 1987, a handsome new Mercedes Benz S-560 luxury sedan was parked on my front lawn. It was a gorgeous vehicle. I could almost smell the wood and leather interior through the windows – which is as close as ever I got to the interior, because a sign in the window reminded me that I had asked for the car by April 1, and I had received it. But I had neglected to ask for the keys. What I had was a \$60,000 lawn ornament. Be careful what you ask for: you just might get it. That story was picked up on Good Morning America, the Paul Harvey Show, USA Today, the Associated Press and about 50 newspapers nationwide, and so ended my fifteen minutes of fame.



BETTY MASTERS/RT&WN

The Rev. Mark Radecke with his April Fool's Mercedes

James and John, Jesus' disciples whose nickname was “sons of thunder,” are after more than fifteen minutes of fame. They ask Jesus to grant their wish that they be allowed to sit, one at his right hand and one at his left, when he comes into his glory. Jesus cautions them: “Be careful what you ask for: you just might get it.”

The thunder brothers think they are asking for a share of the kingdom and the power and the glory as the world defines kingdom and power and glory: a place in Jesus' cabinet — secretary of state and secretary of defense, maybe – when the newly-crowned King Jesus ascends his earthly throne. They covet the power to do as they please, the authority to rule others, and the glory that radiates from the one they had the good sense to follow from fishing nets to throne room.

Jesus, however, knows that the only crown he will wear is a crown of thorns, and the throne he will ascend will be a cross. So he warns the thunder boys: “Be careful what you ask for: you just might get it.”

St. Mark shows his skill as a gospel writer when he has James and John ask Jesus, “Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory.” Mark's is the shortest of the four gospels, devoid of extraneous details. Why waste parchment and ink on this “one at your right hand, one at your left” business? Even if you didn't do terribly well in high school or college literature courses, you might recognize this as a bit of foreshadowing, and an ironically skillful bit at that. Mark uses the phrase, “one on his right and one on his left” in only one other place in his gospel. You remember where? “Then they brought Jesus to the place called Golgotha, which means the place of a skull... and they crucified him... And with him they crucified two bandits, *“one on his right and one on his left.”*”

That is, of course, where Jesus comes into the fullness of his glory, according to Mark:

- in power made perfect in weakness;
- in refusing to hoard his life, instead giving it away for all;
- in declining to lord it over others as tyrants do,
- in being a servant, even a slave, to others. This, Jesus says, is the road to greatness.

Be careful what you ask for: you just might get it. In point of fact, James did. He is the only apostle whose martyrdom is recorded in scripture, run through by a sword at the hands of King Herod. He persevered in following Jesus long enough to transcend his earlier desire for worldly glory. People can and do change, can and do come to new insights and understandings.

The world has long since forgotten the viceroys and lieutenants of the kings of the ancient Near East. It has not forgotten James. His witness as a bumptious and self-impressed glory seeker turned faithful disciple and martyr inspires us to this day.

Be careful what you ask for: you just might get it. It is a lesson we do well to learn.

When you ask, “Lord, give me a clue about how you want me to spend my life (or the rest of my life),” be careful what you ask for: God may just give you more than a clue, and that clue might turn into a call, inviting you to pursue a path you had never dreamt of before, and to a place that you may not find terribly appealing. At least the “you” you are now may not find it terribly appealing. But people can and do change, even late in life.

When you sing, “Take my silver and my gold/not a mite would I withhold,” be careful what you ask for: God may take you at your word, and teach you the wondrous joys of giving that so abundantly surpass the dreary delights of hoarding.

When you pray, “Lord, heal this relationship,” be careful what you ask for: The Great Healer may show you that the only healing some relationships may know in this lifetime calls for you and the other to part company.

At root, this story is about the faithful stewardship of power and authority. Muhlenberg Lutheran Church is in the process of discerning and deciding who will be its next pastor. That is a position of power and authority, to be exercised in imitation of the One who used his power and authority to serve, to liberate, to gather into one community those whom society often wants to divide and separate.

The same holds true, I believe, for leaders in the world of business and politics. I am reminded of the words of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., who said, "Power without love is reckless and abusive. Love without power is sentimental and anemic." But when power and love join forces, therein lies the force that can transform both individuals and structures.

You who are younger, who stand at or just over the threshold of full membership in the adult world: you have hearing that is in many ways more acute than that of your elders. Do not let the great blaring banal voice of the mass culture deafen you to the gentle but persistent voice of the One who tells you what you already know to be true: that whoever would be great must be a servant, and whoever wishes to be first must be slave of all. Follow the one who chose towel and basin and foot washing over royal robes and gaudy scepters. Wear the gift of your baptismal gown with a paradoxical mix of humility and pride. Give – your life, your treasure, your talent. For as James and John learned, and St. Francis after them, it is in giving that we receive.

Our calling is not to be perfect. Our calling is to follow Jesus as he walks the path of service, introducing to the world a radically new definition of power and authority and glory. You have asked a hundred times to be a better disciple. It is a good and worthy prayer. I pray it with you. I pray it for you. But let us all do so in the knowledge that we are handling spiritual dynamite here.

Be careful what you ask for: you just might get it.