

“Hey Jesus, I got a question for you. I’ll be glad to follow you, but first, I need to know: What’s in it for me?”

Consumer spirituality dominates religious life in the Western world. Consumer spirituality transcends denomination – Presbyterian, Lutheran, Methodist, Baptist; we’re all dealing with it. It transcends Protestant-Catholic-Orthodox divisions. I suspect that if we were to look closely at contemporary Jewish and Muslim and other religious life, we would find that they too are confronted by the challenge of being authentic in the face of a consumer approach that wants to take a little of this and leave some of that.

Consumer spirituality shows itself in a lack of commitment to any particular faith community. “I like the preacher at the Baptist church, but the music at the Presbyterian Church is really terrific; and I do enjoy the way they use videos at the Independent church.” The question these folks confront any church with is “what’s in it for me?”

Our lesson from Mark shows that this isn’t a new challenge. Jesus faced it on the way to Jerusalem. Consider the contrast: Jesus is resolute. He knows that every step he takes brings him closer to the final confrontation that will bring about his death. *Mark 10:45 (NRSV)* “*For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.*”

Meanwhile, his disciples keep missing his message. A few miles ago in Mark 9, he overheard the disciples arguing about who would be the greatest, so he said to them: *Mark 9:35 (NRSV)* “*Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.*” Then he illustrated his point by taking a child in his arms and blessing him, for we all must enter the kingdom of God as a child. Then along came the rich young ruler (surely a marvelous candidate for the kingdom) and Jesus showed how hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God.

You’d think the disciples would pick up on the trend in Jesus’ teaching, but they don’t; truth be told, how quick are we on the uptake? James and John catch a quiet moment with Jesus and come forward and are very forward, *Mark 10:35 (NRSV)* “*Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you.*”

The last time we heard a request like that was back in Galilee in Mark 6: *Mark 6:22–23 (NRSV)* ²² *When his daughter Herodias came in and danced, she pleased Herod and his guests; and the king said to the girl, “Ask me for whatever you wish, and I will give it.”* ²³ *And he solemnly swore to her, “Whatever you ask me, I will give you, even half of my kingdom.”*

We know how that ended; not well, especially for John the Baptist. This conversation isn’t going to end well either. James and John have Jesus’ attention, and the old saying, “Be careful what you wish for, you might just get it” is about to come true.

Jesus answers their question with a question: *Mark 10:36 (NRSV)* “*What is it you want me to do for you?*”

Sit with that question for a moment. Imagine that Jesus is asking it of us: *Mark 10:36 (NRSV)* “*What is it you want me to do for you?*”

How do we answer? “Jesus, we’d like you to make our church grow; not so much that we’d be a face in the crowd; but enough so that we didn’t have to worry.” “And speaking of worry, Jesus, we’d like to you to give us more of that peace you promise and a few more shekels in our pockets and in the offering plate would sure ease our minds.” “And while we’re on the subject of minds, Jesus, how about a few less questions and a few more answers? How about more certainty and less doubt? We talk about, “if the way be clear,” how about clearing the way?” “Jesus, I guess the bottom line is – we want you to make it not so hard for us; we’re not asking for easy street (although that wouldn’t be so bad) but we do want following you to not be one struggle after another. Can you do that for us, Jesus, please?”

Mark 10:36 (NRSV) “What is it you want me to do for you?”

I’ve only scratched the surface on possible answers, but the genius of Jesus is that he has asked a question that reveals us for who we are; our answer pinpoints where we are most in need of grace and conversion.

Jesus asks the question that lies at the heart of consumer Christianity; Jesus/Pennside Presbyterian Church, you are here for me; and if I don’t like what I get from you, I’m out of here.”

James and John sound a lot like us when they answer Jesus: *Mark 10:37 (NRSV) “Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory.”*

Jesus replies that to sit at his right or his left isn’t for him to decide but it is for those for whom it has been appointed.

I used to think that Jesus was affirming the sovereignty of God here; that’s a very Presbyterian thing to do, but I think he is foreshadowing what is to come.

James and John are thinking of thrones and glory; Jesus is thinking of a cross with a thief on his right and a thief on his left; thieves that Pilate will choose; the cross is his glory; the cross is his throne.

James and John will share that glory; they too will drink the bitter cup as we all do; but if we listen to what Jesus is saying here, we can know peace in the pain and discover meaning in the mystery. We can embrace a LIFE STYLE of service that pays off.

James and John (and to be fair the rest of the disciples) did not understand what Jesus was telling them as they walked to Jerusalem, but they did know that it was risky; they knew they were walking right into the teeth of Roman and religious power; all of Jesus’ enemies were assembled in Jerusalem, and they were putting themselves in their hands.

The disciples did not understand, but they kept following. They did not turn back. They did not turn away, and they got to Jerusalem. They witnessed cross and resurrection. They beheld the glory that they sought but did not understand; and they were changed; they were converted from consumer Christianity that wants to know what Jesus will do for us to a LIFE STYLE of service that pays off.

Mark 10:45 (NRSV) "For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many." And he sends us to do the same. He sends us to serve in the midst of the mystery and the misery; he sends us even when we do not understand and the answers are slow in coming. He sends us, and if we will go where he goes and do what he does, we will be witnesses of resurrection; we will see the glory of God in the midst of it all. Our service will pay off.

Here's what this looks like: The *New York Times* ran a story on Chain 124, "the longest chain of kidney transplants ever constructed, linking 30 people who were willing to give up an organ with 30 who might have died without one." The chain began with a Good Samaritan named Rick Ruzzamenti, who decided rather impulsively that he wanted to donate his kidney to someone in need. As the article reports, the donation chain's "momentum was then fueled by a mix of selflessness and self-interest among donors who gave a kidney to a stranger after learning they could not donate to a loved one because of incompatible blood types or antibodies. Their loved ones, in turn, were offered compatible kidneys as part of the exchange."

In other words, a wife who wanted to donate a kidney to her husband but couldn't because they were incompatible for whatever reason donated a kidney to someone, and in return, her husband eventually would get a compatible kidney from someone else.

I love this story not only for its supercharged pay-it-forward mentality and because it is a reminder that there are people who will be this generous. But I also love it because it's illustrative of how interconnected our lives are. Aren't we all links in a chain of sorts? Whether it's donating a kidney or something smaller, like sharing a smile or lending a laundry card, we can all do something today to inspire someone else to be kind too.

The last link in the chain of the 30 interconnected transplants, organ recipient Donald C. Terry said to his doctor, "Is it going to continue? I don't want to be the reason to stop anything." "No, no, no," the doctor assured him. "This chain ends, but another one begins."¹

Jesus asks us, *Mark 10:36 (NRSV) "What is it you want me to do for you?"* What do we want? Do we want a consumer Christianity that is only interested in "what's in it for me?" Or, do we want to be witnesses to the power of resurrection in our midst? What do we want?

Jesus shows us that the path to glory is through the cross. We are sent to serve. Keep following, even when you do not understand. Keep the faith, even when the answers elude you. In this age when authentic Christianity is going against the tide, when servanthood is swamped in selfishness; Pennside, as we look forward to the work Jesus has placed in our hands in 2016 and the places he sends us to: Commit yourself to a LIFE STYLE of service that pays off. Amen.

¹ Read more: <http://www.oprah.com/spirit/Modern-Kindness-Stories-of-Generosity#ixzz3om6cHAFD>