

“What Do We Want in Our House?”
by Rev’d. Tanya Stormo Rasmussen
Proper 23B
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Psalm 91
John 10:35-45

You have to hand it to James and John. I mean, I can understand why the other ten disciples were miffed with the brothers—after all, it takes some *chutzpa* to explicitly *ask* for the most privileged places of honor. Lots of people make it clear that that’s what they’re vying for, as they sidle up to people of power and authority. And plenty of others who recognize what’s going on (and, truth be told, would be tempted to compete with them if they didn’t view it as so *déclassé*) might roll their eyes and sigh or mutter under their breath.

But the brothers approaching Jesus had asked him for those seats of honor in such a naïve and arguably manipulative way—a bit like the little boy who puts on his most adorable demeanor and says, “Mommy, I’m going to ask you for something, and I just want you to say yes, okay?”

But here’s why I say you’ve got to hand it to them: James and John knew what they wanted—they had a *vision* for their future; they had identified several things about themselves and about what they wanted. Each of them had recognized that there was something about Jesus and the way that he lived that was more fully alive, more purposeful, more fulfilling than anyone or anything else they’d ever encountered. They’d also noticed that, although by most accounts their lives were pretty good, they nonetheless felt something lacking. And so, despite a successful fishing business, they dropped everything and followed Jesus. (We know they were among the financially better-off fishermen, because Mark says at the beginning of his gospel account they owned at least one boat—the poorer fishermen couldn’t have afforded it.)

The two brothers had clearly recognized that Jesus was destined for greatness (although, as they soon discovered, his sort of greatness is different from what they first imagined—and different from everything the world counts as great). And they had decided that they wanted to be with him the whole way, no matter what it took.

Jesus even challenged them on it, saying: ³⁸ ...“You have no idea what you’re asking. Are you capable of drinking the cup I drink, of being baptized in the baptism I’m about to be plunged into?” ³⁹⁻⁴⁰ “Sure,” they said. “Why not?” (Mark 10:38-39, *The Message* transl.)

James and John knew what they wanted; they were clear that they wanted to be leaders. They also knew they wanted to be as close to the Master as they could be. Maybe they felt they’d given up leadership positions in the fishing community in order to follow Jesus and they knew they’d make good leaders. Perhaps they felt that they were already

further along on their spiritual pilgrimage, they had a deeper understanding of faith, than the other ten disciples—so it just made sense to them that they should assume the lead positions. Maybe they really just wanted power and glory and were unaware of how their bald their ambition looked to the rest of the world—after all, our egos do have a way of hiding our less seemly motivations from our consciousness, don't they?

Jesus said, "Come to think of it, you *will* drink the cup I drink, and be baptized in my baptism. But as to awarding places of honor, that's not my business. There are other arrangements for that." (Mark 10:38-40, *The Message*)

In time, just as Jesus had said, the brothers would indeed learn what it took to have—and to share with the world—a life like his. They would learn from Jesus, and from their own experience as they aimed to emulate him, that the richest, most life-giving life is the life of giving; the most deeply and eternally rewarding sort of leadership is *servant* leadership.

According to Mark, Jesus taught all of the disciples—the two ambitious, visionary brothers, as well as the reticent ones, and the ones who were also ambitious and visionary, just less bold or brash in their expression of it—that the way to heavenly greatness, to true eminence now and forever, is hardly what the rest of the world expects.

42-45 "You've observed how godless rulers throw their weight around," [Jesus] said, "and when people get a little power how quickly it goes to their heads. It's not going to be that way with you. Whoever wants to be great must become a servant. Whoever wants to be first among you must be your slave. That is what the Son of Man has done: He came to serve, not to be served—and then to give away his life in exchange for many who are held hostage." (Mark 10:42-45, The Message translation)

This is the vision Jesus lived by: it's what gave him the courage and strength to sacrifice his very life, and to prove that even a humiliating and torturous death at the hands of the world's so-called powerful is not powerful enough to extinguish or conquer God's love.

Jesus' vision was to give his life away in every way possible, so that those held hostage by the false gods and powers of this world might be liberated, healed, re-united with God. It was this vision, emerging from his resurrection, that also gave birth to the Church—because his disciples, both then and to this day, have discovered the meaning and joy in giving extravagantly so that others might also live and know God more fully.

As most of you are aware, this is Stewardship month here at The Congregational Church of Hollis. And the Stewardship Board has chosen this year to focus on the theme of taking good care of our spiritual home. A key component of taking good care of any home is having a vision for what you want in, and for, and from that home. In that vein, here are some questions you might consider:

Is it enough merely to provide shelter? If so, what sort of maintenance does that require?

Or do you want it to be a place that communicates welcome, safety, the warm embrace of love and acceptance that every human being longs for?

Is the home you envision filled with music? What sort of music, and how often is it playing?

How about conversation and education—dialogue, learning, mutual sharing?

What about laughter? Good food, drink, and fellowship?

And what about challenge and encouragement to grow, accompanied by the sort of support and resources that will help to make that happen?

As you think about your ideal *spiritual* home, what does *it* include? In addition to those same questions I just asked, we might also wonder: Is it pretty much the same as it is right now—familiar faces and (somewhat) comfortable routines?

Or, are there new people present—and if so, are you willing to deal with the new ideas and different ways of doing things that they'll bring with them?

Is it experimental, or does it stick to the tried and true? If it's a combination, then what are the things you'd hate to see discontinued? What are some of the things you'd be happy to see experimented with or tried?

I know that for many of you, this church already manifests everything you think a vibrant and thriving church should. And it's true: our status quo here is arguably quite healthy and lively.

It's been about nine weeks since I arrived here in mid-August. And in those two months, I've learned a lot about the history and present life of this congregation. I've been deeply impressed by the number of talented, devoted, faithful individuals who have stepped up and stretched in all sorts of different directions in order to meet the needs of this congregation's series of leadership transitions across the past number of years.

And guess what: our transitions aren't over! (In particular, as we heard last week, our Christian Education Directors will be stepping down at the end of the month. So that presents us with the opportunity to vision anew how we'd like to approach the Christian Education program and leadership for all ages here at our church.)

But as people of faith, followers of Jesus, our aim is never to feel settled or complacent; for us, life itself is all about transformation, revolution, forever changing in order to more fully resemble the One we strive to follow.

So, although I warmly affirm all of the wonderful things that are happening here, I have to tell you: I have further dreams for this place—visions and aspirations for our community that will build on the strength and vibrancy that’s already here, and will do more than just maintain what is, arguably, a healthy status quo. I hope you have similar dreams and visions, too!

We’re going to have a couple minutes of quiet time (you can take more if you’d like, during the collection of the offering, or following the service) to complete the little insert in your bulletin. [Show]

It’s important to us that we receive as many responses to this as we can; we’re going to take seriously everything that’s written down, and it will be used as we discern our way forward.

Good stewardship has to do with faithfully managing all of the resources entrusted to us by God. Our Christian stewardship isn’t just an annual fund-raising month in the life of the church: it’s a way of life. It entails thinking carefully about what we have, what we’d like to have, and what we need in order to accomplish God’s work through this household of faith.

Good, faithful Christian stewardship calls us to risk something—to stretch, to do something bold that will help us develop in our ability trust that God will help us as we lean into what we believe is God’s vision.

As you’ve heard me say week after week (because I really believe it!), good stewardship involves thinking about how we use the daily amounts of time, talent, and financial treasure we’re given. How do our decisions about what we’re spending our time doing, or our money buying, or our talents expressing—how do these decisions reflect our deepest values?

As you’re thinking about what you’ll write on your piece of paper, I also want you to consider what you’re willing to commit—think about how you, personally (or your family) might be able to help make whatever it is you envision for this church’s future a reality by the commitment you’ll make on your pledge card in the next couple of weeks.

Because, as Jesus suggested to James and John, fulfilling our vision won’t come without a cost. However, if our vision is in line with God’s vision, then the cost will not feel like a burden to us: whatever we pledge to give will be gifts we offer with hope and joy, because of the life it can bring to the world, and the ways we’ll discover it also enriches our own life.

May we be as bold and eager as James and John were to ask for what we want from God, especially for this household of faith. And may we also be as prepared as they were to accept the cost of becoming bearers of life and hope, of sacrifice, and of resurrection.

God help us, guide us, inspire, and bless us, please. In Jesus’ name. Amen.

