
What Should We Ask For?

A sermon by the Rev. Dr. Thee Smith
Proper 10 – Year B

The king said to the girl . . . "Whatever you ask me, I will give you, even half of my kingdom." She went out and said to her mother, "What should I ask for?" Mark 6:22-24

Today we hear a similar invitation from our King; King Jesus. Listen as he offers again to give ‘whatever we ask in his name,’ just as he so generously offered us in John 14:13); even offering us his kingdom of the beloved community. The only pertinent question for us is, ‘What should we ask for?’ Like the young girl in today’s gospel we get to ask, ‘What should we ask for?’ And providentially our epistle appointed for today provides a checklist of answers to that question. But more about that later!

Before we go there I’m going to take a minute to build a little suspense here. It’s about a humorous expression that connects to today’s gospel. You’ve likely heard it before. But I’ve been unable to find an origin for it. Whenever a source for something like this eludes me in my college courses I like to ask my students to research it for me. Maybe, if it catches your interest too, you’ll indulge me and see what you can find. I’ve found a couple of celebrities who have used it in their work: the author Ron Hall and Atlanta comedian, Jeff Foxworthy; also some musicians who include it in their lyrics. But none of them qualify as the original source. An internet site also describes it as a southern expression, meaning the American South, and another site simply calls it an English proverb. But that’s as far as I’ve gotten.

Well, to end the suspense, here’s the expression: ‘When mama ain’t happy, ain’t *nobody* happy.’ Yes, we can all identify with that, even if you never heard it before: ‘When mama ain’t happy, ain’t *nobody* happy.’ By the way, I’m sorry that it’s another one of those sayings that can be interpreted to mean negative things about mothers. I apologize for that. But here’s a related question for you: When was the first time you heard somebody say it?

I distinctly remember where I first heard it: it was part of a comedy routine on the Carol Burnett Show in the 1970s. ‘Back in the day’ Carol Burnett created a series of scenes called, “Mama’s Family.” We have something similar today with Atlanta-based film director Tyler Perry’s caricature of his popular character, “Mamadear.” Unlike Tyler Perry however Carol Burnett did not cast *herself* as Mama but as Mama’s sidekick and foil, Eunice. Another actress, Vicki Lawrence, played Mama and Ken Berry played her son Vinton or “Vint.” (That’s V-I-n-t not V-E-n-t; although I suppose he also does a lot of v-E-n-t-i-n-g/+venting on the show as if his name were also spelled V-E-n-t!) Here are a couple of exchanges to give you a sense of the kind of humor the show specialized in.

Vint says: Mama, can I talk to you?

Mama says: Well, yes, grab a towel and help with the dishes.

Vint says: No, Mama, I can’t think and dry dishes.

Mama says: Well, how do you know? You’ve never really tried either.

So you get the idea. Much of the humor on the show had to do with making fun of Vint’s intelligence. In one exchange he gets so sensitive about it that he asks another character, “How dumb do you think we are?” And she replies wittily, “I may need a chalkboard to answer that question.”

Okay, you get the picture. I'm sorry to say, though, that I've not been able to find the particular exchange that gets to our proverbial expression, 'When mama ain't happy.' Instead I found a scene where Mama has just discovered that Vint and his fiancée Naomi are getting married. In this exchange she asks someone why the betrothed couple doesn't seem to be happy around each other. "Why can't they get along?" Mama asks. Ironically another character says, "Because they hate each other." And then Mama makes her own ironic remark, "Well, that's no excuse! It never stopped any of the rest of us!" (<http://www.neloo.com/fannesite/mama.html>)

Well, what I like about that exchange is the way it transcends the proverb, 'When Mama ain't happy.' In this dysfunctional family they get along anyway. No matter how badly the characters bad-mouth each other or misbehave they manage somehow or another to still be 'Mama's family' and therefore, as she says, to "get along."

That's not the case in today's gospel, however. King Herod's family is a study in family pathology. Nothing there is humorous or comic. Rather it's vicious, even wicked and perverse. A young girl is enlisted by her own mother to serve as accomplice in the execution of a popular prophet, John the Baptist. Herodias, the mother, was incensed against John for stating that King Herod's marriage to her was unlawful. So she encouraged her daughter to demand to the King that John be executed. The daughter, unnamed in the gospel story, is famously or infamously named "Salome"—Salome she's called in other ancient sources. In Western tradition she became a symbol of dangerous female seduction, a so-called *femme fatale*, because of the dance described in today's gospel and the resulting role it played in a hero's death.

However I prefer to think of her as a deluded pawn in the power dynamics that our gospel describes; an innocent youth more victim than perpetrator in the atrocity story her elders crafted for her. "What should I ask for?" the youth asked her elder. I read her question as that of any young person who is dutiful and solicitous of guidance from a parent or any elder for whom she has proper respect and even devotion. But in this case, instead of parental graciousness or something gracious to ask for she was given something deadly; something that has brought scandal and dishonor to the entire family for all subsequent history.

So now we hear how our earlier proverb applies in a very different context where it is not comic or witty but forbidding and cautionary: 'When *this* mama ain't happy ain't nobody happy!'

It's another atrocity story: and we're getting too used to such stories nowadays, aren't we? On the one hand there's today's gospel atrocity about the beheading of John the Baptist. On the other hand there's our latest national atrocity in Charleston, South Carolina: the racist murder of nine members of Emmanuel AME church during a Wednesday night Bible Study. But 'thanks be to God' we have two other scripture readings appointed for today. First there's another King presented in our Old Testament scripture, King David. And it's David himself who performs a holy dance before all his people; "leaping and dancing," the scripture says, before the "Ark of God" (2 Samuel 6:16, 4).

But even more awesome is the text we have in today's Letter to the Ephesians. Journey with me now into our other scriptures for today and let us "leap and dance" with King David rather than Salome; leap and dance according to the gospel of love and redemption that scripture *also* offers us today. And need I remind us that we have three Kings before us today? –Yes, we have not only King Herod and King David but also King Jesus to attend to today.

And again: we hear a similar invitation from our King as Salome heard from hers. Just as Herod offered to give her whatever she asked for, so our King offers us 'whatever we ask in his name; just as he offered us so generously in John 14:13; even offering us his kingdom of the beloved community. The question remaining for us is, 'What should we ask for?' And as I promised earlier, here's a checklist of answers to that question from our epistle appointed for today.

Ephesians 1:3-14

[1:3] Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, [1:4] just as he chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love.

Wow! What an expression, 'to be blameless before him in love.' How much that contrasts with the picture we have in our gospel. Here's the opportunity we have, the destiny we're offered in Ephesians. We're empowered to become "blameless before him in love." What if that had been the picture in our gospel story of King Herod, his wife Herodias, and her daughter, Salome? What if those characters could have become 'blameless before God in love,' instead of being the family they were apart from being blessed with "every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places?"

And what if—what if our young man, the perpetrator in Charleston, South Carolina, had grown up in a family which cultivated him to be ‘blameless before God in love?’ That’s the prospect we have before us in Ephesians, that all our families could have that kind of inheritance. For as Ephesians goes on to say,

[1:5] He destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of his will,
[1:6] to the praise of his glorious grace that he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved.

“Grace . . . freely bestowed on us in the Beloved.” And what a grace, that we could live in families and communities that have

[1:7] redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace [1:8] that he lavished on us.

Oh, what a church that is in Charleston—Emmanuel AME, in which forgiveness was the response to atrocity! It is genuine Christian forgiveness that has been “lavished on” us Christians, and so out of generosity and abundance we lavish it also on others. Indeed in some places we offend other people; people who say ‘How dare you be so forgiving; how dare you lavish forgiveness so prodigally on those who have offended you, who violated you? *What can you be thinking?!*

But that is our inheritance in the church; an inheritance, as Ephesians goes on to say, that has been given to us—

—With all wisdom and insight [as] [1:9] he has made known to us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure that he set forth in Christ, [1:10] as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth.

So we’re talking about not just heavenly things or forgiveness out there somewhere, but forgiveness among things “on earth” here today; in our day-to-day experience in the real world where we experience all kinds of betrayals and violations. Where else or when otherwise were we expecting to practice this kind of unmerited, unconditional love and forgiveness; in an after-life somewhere? Is that our theology of eternal life; only some future world where we begin to practice our Christian calling? Rather here and now we are called to be the ‘church,’ the body of him in whom are gathered “all things . . . [both] glorious things in heaven and inglorious things on earth.” And thus—

[1:11] In Christ we have also obtained an inheritance, having been destined according to the purpose of him who accomplishes all things according to his counsel and will, [1:12] so that we, who were the first to set our hope on Christ, might live for the praise of his glory.

Indeed, there are many of us in Christian community today who can say something like, ‘among you we were first to set our hope on Christ and now we exhort you also to live for his glory and not your own. Indeed, when we—

[1:13] had heard the word of truth, the gospel of [his] salvation, and had believed in him, [we] were marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit; [1:14] this is the pledge of our inheritance toward redemption as God’s own people, to the praise of his glory.

We’re still in Pentecost season, church. We’re still celebrating the giving of the Holy Spirit to the church as the pledge that we have this glorious inheritance. And we’re still being called and calling on ourselves and others to live out that pledge in all the ways that we’ve just described.

So now if anyone comes to us and asks, as Salome went out and asked her mother, “What should I ask for?” (Mark 6:24) we have this checklist on ‘our chalkboard.’ Ask that we might be—

- “Blameless before him in love;” that we might have
- “Grace . . . freely bestowed on us in the Beloved;” and that we have the
- “Forgiveness of our trespasses . . . lavished on us;” so that we have
- “Wisdom and insight . . . [to know] . . . the mystery [of] . . . things [gathered in him] in heaven and things on earth;” and that we might have
- “An inheritance . . . [of living] for the praise of his glory;” so that
- “The promised Holy Spirit . . . [might be] the pledge of our inheritance” (Eph. 1:3-14).

That's what we should ask for; all of that! Oh, if only Salome had been able to ask for what we can ask for. Oh, if only that deluded youth in Charleston had been able to ask for what we can ask for. But *we* can ask for it; all of it—even the beloved community of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. And so church, let us ask, on behalf of ourselves, and on behalf of so many others in the world who need this abundant grace. Let's ask and be the church!

In the name of God: "Our Maker, Defender, Redeemer, and Friend," Amen!

(Source: "O Worship the King," *The Hymnal* no. 388, stanza 5)

APPENDIX

The related Sequence Hymn appointed for today's Lectionary

There's a wideness in God's mercy
like the wideness of the sea;
there's a kindness in his justice,
which is more than liberty.
There is welcome for the sinner,
and more graces for the good;
there is mercy with the Savior;
there is healing in his blood.

There is no place where earth's sorrows
are more felt than in heaven;
there is no place where earth's failings
have such kind judgment given.
There is plentiful redemption
in the blood that has been shed;
there is joy for all the members
in the sorrows of the Head.

For the love of God is broader
than the measure of man's mind;
and the heart of the Eternal
is most wonderfully kind.
If our love were but more faithful,
we should take him at his word;
and our life would be thanksgiving
for the goodness of the Lord.

Words: Frederick William Faber (1814-1863), 1862

Music: *St. Helena*, Calvin Hampton (1938-1984)

The Hymnal 1982 No. 469 (NY: Church Hymnal Corp., 1985)