

What are the songs you sing with your life? If you think of the way we live our lives as the song we sing, what would that be? Well, I'm afraid that we're so self centered and self focused, that our theme songs might be, “My Way,” or “I Gotta be Me.” Or perhaps, “I, Me, Mine,” or “The Real Me.” Or maybe, “Me, Myself, I,” “Dancing with Myself,” “See Me, Feel Me,” or “Let's Talk About Me,”

But Jesus sings a different kind of song. Last week in ch8 of Mark. Jesus sings about his suffering and rejection. Peter sings, ‘No way--that can't happen to you Lord.’ And Jesus tells Peter that Peter is not in tune with God: “Get behind me Satan, for you are setting you mind not on divine things, but on human things.

Which brings us to our Gospel lesson today from Mark ch9.

In ch 9, Jesus is singing the second verse of the same song he was singing in ch8: v31: “The Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him, and three days after being killed, he will rise again.”

It's the same song from ch8: betrayal, crucifixion, resurrection.

But in v32 we see that the disciples just ain't getting it.

“They did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him.

That's absolutely the worst thing any teacher can face: pupils who don't understand, and who won't ask questions. Jesus probably wished he had a couple of aspirin.

So instead of trying to understand what Jesus is saying, the disciples start doing something else. They start to squabble among themselves. They start to argue as they're walking down the road about which one of them is the greatest. They're arguing about who has the highest place in the pecking order. They're jockeying for the highest position on the corporate ladder. They're fighting about who is going to get the biggest piece of the pie.

That night, v33, they stop in the town of Capernaum. And Jesus asks ‘What were you guys arguing about on the road today?’

Busted. v34 The disciples all hang their heads. They look down. They have these dumb expressions on their faces. They thought ‘He heard. He heard us arguing about who was the greatest. He wasn't supposed to know. How embarrassing.’ But they don't say anything.

So v35, Jesus sits down and calls the 12 over. Sitting down has a very specific meaning. In those days, teachers sat down to teach. So the disciples know what's about to happen. ‘He's going to give us a lecture.’

Jesus tells them, v35: “Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.” “In the NT, the words “servant” and “slave” are interchangeable. “Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and slave of all.”

That doesn't make much sense. The one who is first is the king. The one who is last is the slave. But Jesus is saying that if you want to be first you have to be a slave. This doesn't make any sense. The disciples probably wished they had a couple of aspirin.

The problem is, the disciples and Jesus are singing two fundamentally different songs. The disciples are singing, “Me” My power. My position. My status in the organization. My importance in Jesus' elite inner circle.

But Jesus is singing, Sacrifice. Jesus is singing suffering. Jesus is singing a song about being so trusting and so dependent upon God that he will go to his death because that's what God wants him to do. He will open his arms and embrace his cross because that's God's will.

The disciples are singing, “Obey your ambitions. Obey your desires. Obey your thirst.” Jesus is singing, “Trust God. Obey God.”

This is where the disciples were missing the boat. And this is where we often miss the boat.

I'm going to rely upon my own power. I'm going to rely upon my own strength. I'm going to rely upon my brains, or my looks, or my bank account, or my credit limit, or my social standing, or my talents and abilities.

And Jesus says, “NO!” That's not God's song. You've got to trust God and not yourself. Otherwise you'll miss out on the kingdom of God.

We have the same message in our Epistle lesson from James. James ch4

In Mark, the disciples were jockeying for position. They were fighting and quarreling to have the #1 and #2 spots in Jesus organization. We have our share of that in our culture.

James says ch4 v1: “Those conflicts and disputes among you, where do they come from? Do they not come from your cravings that are at war within you?”

You want to know what's causing all the conflicts and disputes in your lives? They're coming from your cravings.

v2 “You want something and do not have it; so you commit murder. And you covet something and cannot obtain it; so you engage in disputes and conflicts.”

Now, we think we're off the hook. I've never murdered anyone. James must not be talking about me. But there's literal killing and there's figurative killing. I might not use a real knife. But I might knife someone in the back metaphorically.

You want it. You don't have it. And so you fight over it.
This is true on so many levels.

It's true with naked conflict. Heated battles between two factions or two people. Fighting over what you want. Money. Power. Market share. Position.

But it can also be rather personal.

I may not want what you have. In our culture, we often live in our little private worlds. We may not even know what the Jones's across the street have, so we might not be trying to keep up with them.

But we see things advertised. We see things displayed by characters in TV shows. And we want. And we covet.

So we'll work overtime. We'll take an after school job instead of studying. We take out a second mortgage on the house or max out our credit cards to get what we want.

It may not be committing murder to get what we want. But we often do harm to ourselves, we put ourselves into financial bondage to get what we want. And consequently, we mishear what James says next at the end of v2:

“You do not have, because you do not ask.”

The reason you don't have what you need is you don't ask for it.“

Okay, I'll ask. “Oh God, please let win the lottery. That way I can live on the beach in Acapulco. I'll never have to work again.”

But God doesn't operate that way. James says as much.

v3: “You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, in order to spend what you get on your pleasures.”

You ask for stuff to give you empty pleasures, instead of asking God for what you really need.

James is telling us, “God's not going to play that game.” It's like the old Rolling Stone's song, “You can't always get what you want,” especially if it's empty hedonistic pleasure. But if you ask God, you just might find, you get what you need.

It's all about remembering who we are and whose we are. Life is not about jockeying for position. It's about living as God's servants in the world.

Obedying our desires, trying to obtain everything we covet--that's not what life's all about.

The ultimate goal is to use what God gives us for his glory. Everything belongs ultimately to God: our time, our talent, and yes, even our treasure. They come from God. They are given to us for a season to use. And we have no use for them when we're gone.

And so I constantly have to keep asking myself tough questions: Am I using my time, and my talent, and my treasure as God would have me do? Should I be spending a little more time in prayer and a little less time watching TV?

Is there something additional that God would like me to do with my talents, some area of ministry he'd like me to grow into?

And the really tough one, am I using my financial resources as God would call me to do? Am I giving enough? And how am I spending the rest? Am I spending it only on what my family and I need? How many luxuries items is it necessary for me to own when people elsewhere are starving?

Those are not easy questions. And in trying to answer them with integrity, it means that I have to continually try to take my will, and submit it to God's will.

Ask, and you will receive. But when you ask, do not spend what you ask for on your selfish pleasures. It's a matter of trying to sing God's song in spite of the very different song I'm tempted to sing.

As James says, “Submit yourselves therefore to God.” Turn down the volume of your song, and join in with his song.

“Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you.”

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

The Rev. James P. Haney V
St. Paul's-on-the Plains Episcopal Church