

The Park Road Pulpit
Sermons from Park Road Baptist Church

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Asking for Twice as Much

2 Kings 2.1-12; Mark 9.2-9

Russ Dean, Transfiguration Sunday, February 22, 2009



How much is too much? At the Baptist boys' camp where I worked for nine years, the Craft Hut was just up the path from Cabin #2 Bathhouse. The summer of 1983 when I ran the place I called it "Dino's Depot," and it was a place of learning and creative exploration, a place where the sound of boys' laughter mixed with the "rat tat tat" of hammers, building crooked birds house or pounding the letters of often-misspelled names into leather belts. The inside of the little shack was covered, every free space scrawled in pen or paint with the twisted wisdom of age-less staff members. Just above one of the doors, overlooking the painting table, etched in red tempera paint, this timeless truism imprinted itself onto my brain: "Too much of a good thing... is not enough!"

It does characterize the way we often go about life. As if there is no limit beyond which no good can be found. That, especially in material pursuit, there is no such thing as a "point of no return." So we go on... collecting... gathering... saving... hoarding... too much of a good thing is always... still, not enough. There is no asking for too much.

The yard sale Amy and I organized yesterday to raise money for a boy's baseball team was a vivid testimony to such endless pursuit. Hundred-dollar bicycles, out grown but not out-worn, or on the block just because they bore last year's color or graphic design... fifteen dollars. That must-have video game? You remember, the last copy of which you fought over with some other helpless parent in Walmart just prior to last Christmas! "Put a green sticker on it. Let's see if we can get three dollars for it!" They say "One man's trash is another man's treasure." Eight

families sold \$2000-worth, yesterday, mostly at \$3-a-clip. “One man’s trash is another man’s treasure.” There can be no doubting this in a day when we put so much treasure into the trash.

One of my most faithful supporters, defenders, advocates... and a sometimes vocal critic worries that I don’t sing the praises of capitalism enough. I do understand this concern. With the freedom of the world at our hands to do no limit of good, capitalistic visionaries have given billions to found institutions that have changed the world for the better. Hospitals, universities, beneficent foundations aimed at lifting up the downtrodden. I understand, and am grateful for the wealth of the Rockefellers and Gateses in this world, who will aim at least some of their massive fortunes in the direction of others. And this is not to overlook the collective wealth of the “average Joe’s” who also contribute to the creation of a world of good.

It’s just that it’s hard for me to rest too easily on such honorable evidence, meager as it is in the grand scheme of things. The Carolina Panthers have just announced their willingness to pay one man \$17 million to assault any other man trying to pass his way and holding an oblong, leather ball. This, in the same season that Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools will put over 350 teachers of tomorrow’s future out of work.¹ I know why it happens this way. Call it the unfortunate, necessary evil of capitalism, if you like, the opposite side of the coin of its high-minded counterpart. It’s just that it’s hard for a preacher to acknowledge that such injustice is an inherent structure of our system, to acknowledge this, and not say something.

I don’t think Jesus would sit quietly by. Do you?

If you ever had any question of the inherent tension between our system and Jesus’ theology of “*thy kingdom come*” (Matthew 6.10) (or, maybe we should be bold enough to call it

¹ Last week’s “Charlotte Observer” reported the Carolina Panthers’ ongoing conversation with Julius Peppers. A franchise tag of \$17 million has been placed on the defensive stand-out, who is expressing his interest to be traded. In a separate (but related!) article The Observer reported on proposed cuts to the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools budget, including the reduction of 350 teachers.

the down-right contradiction of values), the current economic malaise, and the universally-agreed-upon solution, should put an end to such confusion, once and for all. How will we escape the impending doom? Democrats and Republicans agree. How, avoid such certain catastrophe? Economists from the left and right are in lock-step on the answer. Will we *sell all that we have and give it to the poor* (Luke 18)? Will we turn our first obligation to the *least of these among us* (Matthew 25)? Will we *turn the other cheek* (Matthew 5)? Will we *seek first the kingdom of God* (Matthew 6, not worrying about tomorrow)? Will we *store not up for ourselves treasures on earth...* (Matthew 6)? Or will we Ask for More... down at the Ford dealership. Ask for More... with our realtor. Ask for More... at South Park Mall. Ask for More when we call the travel agent to plan the next vacation, when we go to the movie, when we shop for groceries, when we... well, there's just no end.

We will get out of this, they say, by Asking for More. I'm not suggesting that Communism or Socialism is a better product, just that a system which can only be repaired by spending our way out of trouble, is inherently flawed, and is markedly at odds with the value system of Jesus. Jesus answered none of the world's problems by buying more of anything. He answered all of the world's problems giving all of everything. I'm only saying that we must keep this contradiction ever in mind, if we hope even faintly to follow his call in this fallen world. Maybe you'll think about this the next time you're urged, asked, or tempted to Ask for More. Let me know how you solve the dilemma.

It is the last Sunday of Epiphany. In the liturgical year, we begin with Advent. Preparing for the coming of the Christ. We celebrate his arrival, at Christmas. We remember his baptism, and we, then, walk through a season which reminds of that the coming of God's Spirit is not just

for us, but is to be an epiphany, a revealing, for the world to celebrate: God's light shines on all the nations. And as we move into Lent, we do so on the heels of the high Sunday of Transfiguration.

It's a strange story. One with mystical, mysterious, elements. Standing before them, Jesus appears with Moses (dead for centuries) and Elijah (not dead, according to the story, but departed from them also for centuries). Many believe the truth of the story is to be grasped just in a face-value reading. What this story means to tell us is simply who Jesus was – yet one more indisputable miracle to prove his divine origin and nature. I'm not convinced this is what it means, or that this is ever, all it was meant to tell. I think, as with all the story of Jesus, the question actually has more to do with us than him. This story, as I understand it, isn't so much about his transfiguration... as it is about ours.

Ironically, then, as I have begun by asking you to question the conventional wisdom that is all around us, suggesting that asking for more will not solve the real problems of this nation, I'm suggesting to you that the solution to our "transfigurational" problems... is just that. How can I change that which needs to be changed in my own life? Be the person I need to be? The one I want to be? How can I be transformed, from jealous partner to trusting companion? How can I move from anger to patience? How can I be a more attentive mother? A more nurturing father? A more mature child? A more sensitive grandparent? How can I think less of myself, and my own petty problems, and more for the needs of those around me that are so great? How can I be at peace?

First, to make any such change – and I believe each of us can make our own list of that which needs changing in our life – to make such change, we must believe that change is possible. I believe. To paraphrase the President's already overused phrase, I believe change is something

we can believe in!² In a sermon from this text, Bruce Epperly suggests that woven into the very fabric of our existence is this possibility. Embedded into the nature of the very universe which gives us life is the openness of creative, surprising, amazing transformation. From subatomic particle to galactic principle... transformational revolution happens! (Put that on a bumper sticker!) The transfiguration of Jesus, far from some one-time event of miraculous, biblical proportion, is a glimpse into the nature of reality. The story is not trying to tell us just of Jesus' unique nature, but of the incredibly open nature of... nature. Change happens. Even dramatic change. Has happened. Can happen. Will happen. Thanks be to God!³

So, first we have to believe. And then... We have to Ask for More. Maybe even Twice as Much! From his sermon on this text, Bruce Epperly continues:

Perhaps, the story of Elisha tells us that we can't afford to think small today. We must ask for something big and then work our hardest to bring it about. Even though ecological and economic—even physical health—limits oppress us; we need to imagine greatness and then live into the greatness we imagine for ourselves and the world.

It is ironic, and tragic, that the same world which teaches us to believe that the sky is the limit, in regard to material expectation, somehow teaches so many people exactly the opposite in regard to personal, and interpersonal, expectation. I will continue to believe that the Church does not need to preach much about sin – for not only is sin, as the great Carl Barth once noted, “the

² In case anyone has missed it one of the slogans of Barack Obama's recent presidential bid, which obviously struck a chord with this nation, was, “Change we can believe in.”

³ Bruce Epperly, “I Want a Double Portion,” at www.processandfaith.org/resources/worship/sermons/DoublePortion_Epp.shtml. From the sermon: “Now, no one knows what really happened on that mountain, but as I read the story of the Transfiguration, I am inspired to imagine the wonders of life on both the cosmic and microcosmic planes. I think of Jesus' body, his whole being, on that day as an energetic body, a quantum body, a body permeated by the living word of God (*dabhar*) that brought the universe into being. I think of a lively, powerful, vital, completely holy and whole body; a body revealing the deepest energies of the big bang, of galactic births and galaxies hugging each other, the power of the atom, and the wonders of the immune system—all revealing the power that cannot be fully fathomed, controlled or understood, but may be experienced as a burst of life and world transforming energy.”

only empirically verifiable doctrine” (it is as obvious as the evening news), but sin is also implanted on the hearts and minds of most folks, every time they look in the mirror, or have a moment to reflect quietly about their own living. I don’t need to remind most of you that you, and I, sin. We seem to have guilt-receptors... sin-sensors... built-in. What more pulpits need to be announcing, without hesitation, is the Good News: Transfiguration Happens – but sometimes we have to ask for it.

How many times have you stumbled around, needing, but not willing, only to have someone notice your need and say to you, puzzled, if not put-out, “Well, all you needed to do was ask!?”

Elisha followed around the great prophet, Elijah, unashamedly dogging his every step, unafraid of being a too-eager fan, a sold-out disciple, and when Elijah asked, Elisha asked, too. “*Tell me what I may do for you...*” Too many of us would have said, “Oh, nothing... I’m fine... Don’t want to trouble you... Don’t worry about me... I can do it myself... Really!” The transformation of Elisha occurred because he had the child-like courage to admit his desire to be like someone else (which is the meaning of discipleship). And he had the unabashed Gaul or Grit or Gusto or Grace to ask for Twice as Much.

So the next time you are ill, and the Sunday school class wants to bring supper... maybe you ought to ask for lunch to go with it! Or maybe you need to look within your heart, and ask God’s help, that you may be twice as faithful to your partner this year... or twice as honest to your company this year... or twice as hard a worker at school, in the office, at home... Or maybe you ought to ask God to make you twice as generous, even when the market is at a near-all-time low.

I want Twice as Much.

So maybe the sage of that old camp graffiti had it more correct than I knew. Too much of a good thing – like asking for honest help, or asking to be twice the disciple I ever imagined... is still not enough. This day, in the spirit of Elisha who was transformed by his courage, and in the spirit of Jesus, who transfigured into the *image of the invisible God* (Colossians 1.15) for those who follow him... may we have the boldness to ask.⁴ And to know that sometimes, we'll need to Ask for Twice as Much.

May it be so!

⁴ Hebrews 4.16: “*Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.*”