

Jesus hears your prayer with joy and helps you in your prayer

13th Sunday after Trinity (Series 2), August 30, 2026

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Hymns: 683, #1 #5, 323, // 246, 431, 55.

Matthew 20:20-28 (ESV) ²⁰*Then the mother of the sons of Zebedee came up to him with her sons, and kneeling before him she asked him for something.* ²¹*And he said to her, "What do you want?"* *She said to him, "Say that these two sons of mine are to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your kingdom."* ²²*Jesus answered, "You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I am to drink?"* *They said to him, "We are able."* ²³*He said to them, "You will drink my cup, but to sit at my right hand and at my left is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared by my Father."* ²⁴*And when the ten heard it, they were indignant at the two brothers.* ²⁵*But Jesus called them to him and said, "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them."* ²⁶*It shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant,* ²⁷*and whoever would be first among you must be your slave,* ²⁸*even as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."*

Grace and peace be with you from God our Father, and from our risen Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

What do you want?

In today's Gospel, we meet the mother of John and James. She's like every other mother. We all know that our mothers want the best for us, and it was the same back then. Matthew tells us:

²⁰*Then the mother of the sons of Zebedee came up to him with her sons, and kneeling before him she asked him for something. (Matt 20:20)*

The little word "then" tells us something had just happened. Jesus has, for the third and final time, foretold that he will be condemned to death, handed over for crucifixion, and die a sinner's death but that he will rise on the third day. It's against this backdrop that the mother of Zebedee's sons comes to Jesus with her request, which is actually quite bold.

She kneels before Jesus, which in the Bible is a sign of worship. It isn't performance or manipulation she genuinely wants to worship Jesus. She comes to him with her request because she knows Jesus has the power to give her what she wants. In the same way, today in our service we do the same thing: we come to Jesus in worship and ask him for something.

Jesus asks her: *"What do you want?"* (Matt 20:21). His question sounds almost curt, dismissive, irritated. We might think the same that Jesus surely won't listen to our prayer. But that's not true. Jesus is not irritated, dismissive, or curt, because he asked the exact same question of two blind men who begged him to restore their sight. They asked him to have mercy on them, and Jesus answered them with the same words: *"What do you want me to do for you?"* (Matt 20:32). So Jesus is asking the

mother of Zebedee's sons: What do you desire? What do you want me to do for you?

Bold and foolish prayers

That's a big question. Jesus the ruler and creator of the universe wants to hear you, me, us, and our desires. He gives you the opportunity to boldly step forward in open prayer, because Jesus can accomplish anything by his word. That can be hard to believe, because in practice we pray so little, and we don't take Jesus at his word. When did you last pray? Maybe last Sunday? The week has been long, and a lot has happened. You got up and had to rush off to work, or you just wanted to go to bed because you were tired. Maybe you thought you prayed a foolish prayer a prayer you felt wasn't worthy of God's attention. Maybe you prayed a selfish prayer, one where you didn't even realize what you were actually asking for.

So what did the mother of Zebedee's sons ask for? Her request was: *Say that these two sons of mine are to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your kingdom* (Matt 20:21). Here we see a selfish prayer. A bold, reckless prayer. The other disciples would probably call it a wrong and sinful prayer.

How does Jesus respond to their request? *"You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I am to drink?"* *They said to him, "We are able."* (Matt 20:22). Somewhat surprising. Jesus isn't dismissive or irritated he simply states that they don't know what they're asking for. Sure, you can pray foolishly and that's allowed. As Philippians makes clear: ⁶*do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.* ⁷*And the peace of God, which surpasses all*

understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. (Phil 4:6-7)

When you pray with your friend, your spouse, or your child, you're allowed to ask for anything. You can ask for what you think is small, or big, or what others might call foolish and reckless. They didn't know what Jesus meant by his "cup," because they hadn't yet grasped that Jesus would die for their sins. Only he could do that. But as Christians who follow Jesus, we aren't guaranteed a perfect life a life free of suffering and pain, a life where our faith is never mocked. That's why Jesus tells them: *"You will drink my cup, but to sit at my right hand and at my left is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared by my Father."* (Matt 20:23). Indeed, one of the two brothers, James, became the first martyr among the twelve.

That's why we also pray here in our service for persecuted Christians that God will protect them and keep them in faith as they drink from the cup of suffering because of their faith in Jesus. We pray about things we barely understand the same is true when we pray for good health, peaceful surroundings, or simply for God's help in everyday life. But even when we don't understand what we're asking for, we can pray to God about anything with confidence. It can also be very concrete: we can pray for our parents, for those who don't yet believe in Jesus, for our employer. We shouldn't hold back, because Jesus is glad to hear our prayers and it's also he who decides what he gives us, and what we receive and don't receive, just as he did with the two brothers, because they didn't understand what they were asking for.

There is something Jesus can give them: his life as a ransom, so that they are saved and given a

place in God's kingdom. And there is something Jesus cannot give them: the seats at his right and left, which have simply been assigned and prepared for others. Is that a bad thing to sit at Jesus' left or right? No. But they didn't know what they were asking for. Even the other ten disciples didn't understand it, even though they got angry at the two brothers. It's only later that it's revealed what would actually have happened if her wish had been granted. At Jesus' crucifixion, we see: ³⁷*And over his head they put the charge against him, which read, "This is Jesus, the King of the Jews."* ³⁸*Then two robbers were crucified with him, one on the right and one on the left.* (Matt 27:37-38). Here it's revealed that Jesus' divine kingdom wasn't what they had expected. Two robbers one on the right, one on the left of Jesus. That is where John and James would have ended up, had their wish been granted. This teaches us something central: at the cross, we see the kingdom of God. In Jesus, we see the kingdom of God drawn near. But they didn't know that yet, which is why Jesus needed to speak with them.

²⁴*And when the ten heard it, they were indignant at the two brothers.* (Matt 20:24)

One wonders whether the other ten would even have been angry with the two brothers, had they understood what was to come. But in that moment, they were angry and irritated, because the two brothers wanted more and wanted to be greater. Deep down, the other ten probably wanted the same thing that's why they got angry. In the same way, we too can get angry when we see faults in others, without seeing that we're the same way ourselves.

Jesus doesn't pretend nothing happened. He notices, and so he calls them to himself and says: ²⁵*But Jesus called them to him and said,*

"You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. ²⁶It shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, ²⁷and whoever would be first among you must be your slave, (Matt 20:25-27)

Jesus tells us how it should be among us. We know how the world works someone has power, and everyone else falls in line. Among us Christians, it shouldn't be that way. We operate under an opposite principle, where the greatest becomes the least, and the first becomes a slave and a servant. This isn't something we can achieve by our own strength only by hearing what Jesus himself says: ²⁸*even as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.*" (Matt 20:28)

We can only do what Jesus commands because he does it for us first. Jesus places himself before us as our Savior. When we look at Jesus, we see that he doesn't want to be served by us he serves us himself. We see that we don't need to be the greatest, because Jesus is the greatest. We don't need to be first, because Jesus is first. We are set free to pray to ask for strength to serve those closest to us and one another. That's what Jesus wants to help us with. That's why he tells us that he didn't come to be served, but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many. That's what allows us to pray boldly. We can come with any kind of prayer even foolish ones in any situation, and Jesus will listen to us. Amen.