

Easter V (14 May 2023)

“VERILY, verily, I say unto you, Whatsoever ye shall ask the Father in my name, he will give it you. Hitherto have ye asked nothing in my name: ask, and ye shall receive, that your joy may be full.”

+In the Name...

“What would you do if you knew you could not fail?” I remember the pastor at the Baptist church where I played the organ in college beginning a sermon with those words? Now of course, we see it on bumper stickers and on social media amidst cute kitten videos and political exhortations, but life did not quite bombard a person with messages in those days the same way it does now.

But the question is just as appropriate today as it was then and even when the Gospel was written some 2,000 years ago. Is this not what Jesus was saying: “Whatsoever ye shall ask the Father in my name, he will give it you.” Suddenly that scene from “It’s a Wonderful

Life” jumped into my mind – where the young George Bailey uses the machine in the drug store. I am not sure what to call it: it appears to be some sort of “magic lamp wishing machine” where if your wish is going to be granted, the flame lights. George wishes for a million dollars, pulls the lever, and lo and behold – it lights! “Hot dog!” exclaims the young boy, although without much surprise in his voice. Surely Christ did not mean that anyone who asks for untold wealth will win the lottery the next day. God will give us whatever we ask insofar as it is according to his will and in his time. I have trouble with that part, as I am not a very patient person. Yet there are three very real possible answers when we ask God for something: yes, no, and not now. The “not now” answer might be worse than “no”. It is exciting, but without the gleeful anticipation of a definite “yes”. Back to the Christmas theme, maybe it would be like asking St. Nicholas for something and getting the response that yes you may have it, but not

necessarily this year. In a year your wants and needs could change.

But then, perhaps that is why God uses that answer.

So when I asked you my question at the beginning of the sermon, did you think of something religious, or something completely secular? Don't worry, I am not going to ask for a show of hands. We cannot all be monks and nuns, or we would have the end of the human race. But that does not mean that each of us is not called to further the kingdom. If I were speaking to a group of high school seniors (it is that time of year to think about graduation) we might interpret this Scripture to be about God giving us a particular occupation, or maybe a spouse. George Bailey wanted to travel the world. But this text is not that specific. No matter our age or our stage in life, God still wants us to work for his kingdom. While most people retire from their secular work at some point in life, there is no retirement from the work of the Kingdom. And really, no retirement

from life! Look at Grandma Moses: she did not start painting until nearly the age of 80.

It is so easy in the church to think that someone else will take care of something, or everything. But can we really be sure that will happen? Sometimes if a person chooses not to do something, it simply will not occur. George Bailey got to see what Bedford Falls (or was it Pottersville?) would have looked like had he never lived: his brother died because he was not there to save him from drowning; his wife was a spinster; and his old boss was in prison because George was not there to keep him from poisoning a customer when he was drunk. “But Father, that’s Hollywood!” you might tell me. Indeed, but can you tell me that we would still have the artwork of the Sistine Chapel without Michelangelo? Would we have the Constitution without James Madison? Would we have St. Mark’s without Catherine Percival? The answer is, of course, that we would have all those things

in one form or another, but that they might not be recognizable to us. And what a loss for mankind if Michelangelo had decided to stay home and watch Youtube videos. And did you know, that even after sculpting the Pieta, painting the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, and painting the Last Judgment, well into his 70s he was the architect for the St. Peter's Basilica that stands in the Vatican today? What if James Madison had decided not to get involved in controversial matters? And did you know, as if being the "Father of the Constitution" and a two-term president was not enough, at the age of 78 he was a delegate to the Virginia Constitutional Convention?

Catherine Percival could have retired in Philadelphia with a gin & tonic in one hand and a croquet mallet in the other, but aren't we glad she didn't?

In our contemporary world we are always chasing after what is newest and fastest and brightest – or at least that is what the culture is

telling us to do. Yet that is counterintuitive. Great writers most often produce their best work at the end of their careers, after they have had a lifetime of research and experience from which to draw. At the end of this mass, we shall bless the “crops” found in the Calvary Garden on account of it being Rogation Sunday. We do not harvest the seedlings, or even the buds, but the fruits, the mature plant. In England on this day, the tradition was to “beat the bounds”, to walk around the boundaries of the parish, that is, the geographic area of the church. Every blade of grass in that country is divided into a Church of England parish. We are not under such limitations, but even if we were, it is unlikely we would suffer from a lack of potential converts to be harvested.

St. James tells us in the epistle this morning not to be hearers only, but doers as well. This, of course, requires more of us, and that can be a challenge. Think back to my question at the beginning of this

sermon: what would YOU DO if you knew you could not fail? Did your idea actually require work of you? Winning the lottery, save buying a ticket, does not require us to do much. The Gospel implies that we do not think too big and God is not able or willing to help us, but that we think too small for God's plans.

This week the Church celebrates the Feast of St. Ubald, a little-known bishop from 11<sup>th</sup> century Italy. Early on in his career, he wanted to be a hermit, but God (and his bishop) had other plans for him. When the monastery he was serving burned down, he thought God was giving him an opportunity to leave in order to do what he wanted, but a close friend convinced him that God had him right where he wanted him. Think of Jonah, who ended up in the belly of a whale because he refused to do what God wanted him to do.

So what are you going to ask God for now? You need not tell me: this is between just you and God; all joking about peppermint bark

and Cadbury Crème eggs aside. Usually as Christians, our anticipated reward is in the hereafter, but not this time: “that your joy may be full”. Even the most devout atheist likes a little joy in his life, or so I assume. We are not Puritans. We need not walk around looking like we sucked on a lemon, as much as the media likes to define Christians based on whom we supposedly hate. So if you do not know what to ask God for, pray about it. Then ask. Then do it. To quote Abp. Benson in this morning’s opening hymn, “be the beauty and the joy with which the years are crowned”. [Hot dog!]

+In the Name...