

YOU DON'T KNOW WHAT YOU ARE ASKING

Has someone ever asked you for something and you responded, either out loud to their face or silently to yourself, “You don’t know what you’re asking”? Or, have you ever asked someone else for something and they responded out loud to you, or you could tell by the expression on their face that they were thinking, “You don’t know what you’re asking”?

Sometimes people ask for things that are totally unreasonable. Sometimes their requests are so excessive and their expectations are so high that it hard to keep from bursting out laughing or shaking our head in stunned disbelief when they communicate them to us.

I may have shared this story with you before, but it came to my mind as I was reflecting on the message I wanted to share with you this morning. When I was a young kid, I loved to watch the TV show *The Adventures of Superman* with George Reeves. I was really into Superman back when I was four or five.

One day, with Halloween fast approaching, I noticed an ad in the paper for a *Superman* Halloween costume. I begged and pleaded for my parents to get me that *Superman* costume because, I explained, I knew that when I put it on I would be able to fly. I envisioned myself leaping out of my second floor bedroom window and soaring around the neighborhood.

“Look! Up in the sky! It’s a bird. It’s a plane. No . . . its little Freddy Gagnon. What the heck is he doing up there?”

How disappointing it was to be told by my parents that a *Superman* outfit wouldn’t give me the ability to fly. It was simply too much to ask of a cheap costume that was likely made in Japan and probably wouldn’t even hold together for the whole time as I canvassed the neighborhood to collect Halloween candy. And if that costume had the ability to speak, it may have said to me, “Fred, you don’t know what you’re asking.”

A brief side note: I never did get that *Superman* Halloween costume. Maybe my parents were worried that I might decide take it out for a test ride and find out for myself whether or not the outfit would allow me to fly

Obviously, I didn’t know what I was asking back then. But at least I had a pretty good excuse. I was just a naive young kid who was all of four or five

years old. James and John couldn't fall back on such an excuse. They were full-grown adults who had been traveling with Jesus for a considerable amount of time. For about three years they had listened to him teach about how the most important thing for his followers to do was to care for and serve others and practice sacrificial love. And on at least three occasions they had even heard Jesus say that he was going to Jerusalem to be arrested, crucified and killed "as a ransom for many."

But in spite of everything Jesus taught them, the brothers requested that they be allowed to sit at Jesus' side and share in his glory. Their request missed the mark so badly and was so unreasonable (in my mind I can picture our Lord sighing loudly and shaking his head at them in disbelief), Jesus had to inform them that, "You don't know what you're asking."

The thing is, Jesus wasn't opposed to hearing their request; and he may have even been open to fulfilling it, if it had been in accordance with Jesus' mission. "What do you want me to do for you?" our Lord asked them. In other words, Jesus was saying to James and John, "Go ahead, I'm listening. What's on your mind?" Maybe Jesus was hopeful that what the two disciples wanted was something he would be able to respond positively to. But he soon learned that his hope and their wish were like apples and oranges. Jesus was looking for a request from James and John that had to do with service and sacrifice. He must have been extremely disappointed that they were seeking power and glory.

James and John wanted to have an advantage over the other disciples. They were asking to be Jesus' right-hand guys. It would have been a lot better if they had asked for open hearts to make them more receptive and able to better understand what Jesus was teaching them and telling them. In other words, they could have used a big dose of humility.

What is it that we seek from the Lord? Isn't it true that most times when we pray, we ask God to do something for us. Like an unknown author once said about prayer, "Many of us are content to send God on small errands." I mean, think about it. Think about the requests we make of God every day. Bless our food; be present in our gatherings; forgive us; don't forget us; give us health, support or financial assistance; act compassionately toward and care for our loved ones; bring peace to the world; feed the hungry; cure the sick; save the sinner; make the difficult decisions for us; help us carry our burdens, or even better, take our burdens away so we don't have to deal with them.

Several years ago a Gallup Poll reported that over half of Americans who said they prayed mostly prayed to ask God for favors. There's nothing wrong per se with asking God for favors, of course. I'm certain that God wants to hear

what's on our minds and wants us to share our needs and desires when we pray. Maybe, every time we begin to address God in prayer, God even asks, "What do you want me to do for you?" But for many people, that's basically the only thing prayer is: to petition God and tell God what they want. They ask, and at times they even demand that God answer their requests, fill their orders, and meet their needs. The result is that God is turned into a gopher. "Go for this, God. Do that, Lord."

In response to many of the things we ask God to do for us, Jesus would probably be justified in saying, "You don't know what you are asking." But there are things that I'm sure God would be delighted to hear us ask for—such as the wisdom and courage to reach out in love and help someone in need.

Alice Faye Duncan shared the following story.

Her name was Jean. She taught first grade. She drove a sputtering old Volkswagen Jetta with dull blue paint and frayed bucket seats. As a single mother with one young son, she found that the car served her needs. It wasn't the speediest vehicle, but Jean was never late to work. In fact, every school day she was the first teacher to arrive and the last teacher to leave.

Jean took great care to plan instruction, create assessments, and decorate her classroom. Parents in the neighborhood would beat down the principal's door to have their children assigned to her class. Jean could teach a mouse to read, and all her students passed into second grade with advanced vocabularies and language skills. Needless to say, she was a gifted teacher.

One August, the faculty returned from summer break to see Jean drive up to school with a carload of children. Two sisters in high school had found themselves living in a dangerous situation. They didn't want to enter foster care. They asked the caseworker to contact their first grade teacher. Jean lived in a modest home with her son. Yet she took the sisters in. One of the girls even had a baby. Jean welcomed the baby into her home, too.

Packed with children, the little blue Jetta sputtered onward. Each day, even though Jean took her son and adopted daughters to school, she was still the first teacher in the school parking lot.

During lunch, while faculty members exchanged life stories in the teacher's lounge, Jean never complained about her new responsibilities. She did, however, speak about her car. With three new bodies to transport, the Jetta was too small. It burned oil. Jean needed something new. She wanted a van.

In the teacher's lounge, Jean shared that a new van was not in her budget, especially with three new children in her home. Like a good friend, I listened to her concerns, but there was nothing I could do. At the time I was a

young teacher who lived at home with my mother. I didn't have any disposable income. But in my heart I wanted to help Jean purchase a van to accommodate her growing family.

I don't know how the idea came to me. But one day during lunch, I didn't go to the teacher's lounge. Instead, I sat at my desk and typed a one-page letter to *The Oprah Winfrey Show*. I shared Jean's story. I told Oprah that Jean was a pillar in our school. Her influence as an educator was so great that two high school girls remembered her kind spirit when they were faced with foster care. They asked and hoped for the impossible and they got it—their first grade teacher welcomed them into her home. And although her resources were limited, Jean made sacrifices to care for the girls as if they were her own.

A month passed. One morning the principal called Jean into his office. He wanted her to attend a "teacher's conference" in Chicago. She had two days to pack. Jean made arrangements for childcare and flew to the Windy City. A limousine driver dashed her away to *Harpo Studios* for a surprise taping of *The Oprah Winfrey Show*.

Oprah's topic for that day was generosity. Midway through the taping, she called Jean to the stage. Oprah hugged the dedicated teacher and explained that she had received a letter expressing her need for a van. The audience listened to the details of Jean's story and clapped for her. Then Oprah announced that Jean would receive a new Chrysler van for her family. Cheers filled the studio and Jean trembled with disbelief. She was speechless, but her tears expressed her overwhelming gratitude.

The year was 1999. Six hundred miles away, I watched the joy of it all from my television in my living room. Jean's big heart taught me many lessons that year. I learned that as we satisfy the needs of others, God satisfies our needs. I learned that the simplest acts (like writing a letter) can require a daring faith. And nothing is impossible with God. Miracles happen every day.

Yes, nothing is impossible with God, and miracles do happen every day. But the caveat is, a lot of times those miracles depend on what we ask for and how we ask for them. Those miracles often depend on the reasons why we ask for them.

I believe there are many times in our lives when Jesus says to us, "What do you want me to do for you? Go ahead, I'm listening. What's on your mind?" I also believe that, if we ask for the right things in the right way for the right reason, Jesus won't respond to us with, "You don't know what you're asking," but with, "I'm so glad that's what you're asking me for. Let me see what I can do for you."

And hopefully, in gratitude and joy, we will say to Jesus in response,

“Thank you, Lord. Now, what can I do for you?”
Thanks be to God. Amen.