

Sunday, September 19, 2021
Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost – Proper 20 (Year B)

Mark 9.30-37

The Rev. Michael K. Fincher

Service Live Streamed at:

<https://www.facebook.com/stgregoryslongbeach/videos/287325389528623>

(Sermon begins at about 20:45)

“Opportunity for Greatness”

In last week’s Gospel reading, Jesus predicted his suffering, death, and resurrection. The disciples did not get what Jesus was talking about and so misinterpreted what he is saying. Which led to Jesus providing a teaching about discipleship—what it means to truly follow him. Well, we have this same pattern today. And we will have the same pattern again in a few more weeks (October 17).

Essentially, what this pattern reveals is that the disciples are so wrapped up in their own stuff that they aren’t fully paying attention to what Jesus is telling them. I mean, both last week and today, Jesus plainly tells them “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” (Mk 9.31). Last week, they didn’t seem to get it for good reason. That was the first time Jesus had dropped this bombshell on them. So, they are naturally distraught at the news and taken aback by what Jesus had revealed about his future. As evidenced by the fact that Peter pulled Jesus aside and rebuked him. But today? Come on, guys. You’ve had a chance to absorb what Jesus told you. But they are distracted. Not distracted by the shocking news. They are distracted by their own petty arguments. Because they are arguing with one another about who is the greatest.

Now, to be charitable toward the disciples, it helps to understand that they have just been challenged in their own ministry. In the interlude between last week’s Gospel and today’s, there is the story of the Transfiguration. While Jesus, along with Peter, James, and John, are up the mountain, the other disciples have an encounter in which a man brings his son, tormented by an evil spirit, to be healed. The disciples are unable to exorcise the demon. Jesus arrives just in time and casts out the demon. Afterwards, the disciples, stinging a little from their inability to help the boy, ask Jesus why they were unable to heal him. Jesus is very gentle with them, noting that it was because of failure to pray. As today’s Gospel reading opens, the disciples are therefore still stinging with their own insecurities and doubts about their abilities. So, they are doing what humans do. They try to make themselves feel better. In this instance, by trying to one-up their fellow disciples.

Feeling a little vulnerable on the heels of their own failure, they certainly don’t want to view their leader as vulnerable. Which is likely how they would have interpreted Jesus’ second passion prediction. They still don’t quite understand what Jesus has been telling them. Given their own sense of vulnerability right now, they are fearful. For Jesus and for themselves. At the same time, they don’t want to ask him any questions on the subject. They particularly don’t want to try refuting or chastising Jesus for saying such things. They saw how Jesus reacted when Peter tried that: “Get behind me, Satan!” (Mk 8.33). Not only that, Jesus had said that “if

any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me” (Mk 8.34). And now Jesus is talking about betrayal, suffering, and death. Yeah, not wanting to go there. Best to have a little diversion. What better way to spend the time than to try to one-up each other and feel good about themselves? After all, in this ancient honor and shame society, greatness was often judged by the company one kept. And right now, Jesus was a big deal. He had a massive following. He was one of the big celebrities of his day. At least in their little corner of the world. So, being his disciples, his inner circle, they, too, would be viewed as big deals. Perhaps more in their own minds than in the minds of the casual observer.

Aware of what’s going on, once again Jesus needs to find a way to disabuse them of their petty, selfish notions. He needs to find a way to illustrate what it means to be his followers. He sits down—probably assuming the stance of a teacher, indicating that he meant business—and tells them “Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all” (Mk 9.35). That in God’s economy, being greatest is not about being first, about being served by others. No, the one who is greatest in God’s economy is the one who places himself in the most humble of positions. The one who puts his own needs and concerns aside to focus on the needs and concerns of others. The one who seeks to serve others—particularly those who are in need themselves. In short, the greatest is the one who takes upon himself that which is of most concern to God—concern for the poor, the widowed, the orphaned, the marginalized, the outcast. And then doing something about it. This is the critical part. Because it’s easy to express concern for the woes of the world. But doing that and nothing else is equivalent to arguing about who is greatest. It’s just a lot of hot air. No, the concern needs to be followed up with action.

This bumps up against their cultural norms. Again, this was an honor and shame society—emphasizing the seeking of status and avoiding disgrace. In the Jewish system, this was tied to definitions of what is ritually clean as opposed to what is ritually unclean, and how ritual purity brings honor and ritual impurity brings shame. The poor, the widowed, the orphaned, the marginalized, the outcast, were often among those considered ritually unclean. Either because of who they were or in many cases, simply because they did not have access to the resources that allowed them to religiously adhere to ritual purity laws and practices. Since part of the worldview of honor and shame societies is that status is determined by the company one keeps, working with those who are marginalized, with those who are or might be considered impure, would be a source not of honor or greatness, but of shame.

So, Jesus is saying that to be great in God’s economy means hanging out with, befriending, helping, those who are on the fringes of society. Actions that in the rest of society would be considered cause for shame. Actions that in God’s economy are cause for honor.

Like a good teacher—and perhaps to illustrate his implied point that actions speak louder than words—Jesus “took a child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms, he said to them, ‘Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me’” (Mk 9.36-37). Welcoming an unknown child would not bring any particular honor. Certainly not like welcoming someone who was rich or famous. But Jesus says that welcoming those who are powerless, those who are marginalized, is actually welcoming the most powerful of all: “the one who sent me.”

In taking the child in his arms, Jesus was sending a subtle visual message that for the disciples would have been a bold statement against their behavior on the road to Capernaum—their arguing about who was the greatest among them. And in case the action of welcoming the child was not apparent enough to them, he puts a period—no, an exclamation point—on it with his words.

Throughout his ministry, Jesus has been demonstrating what it means to be his followers. He has done this through his servant ministry. He has done this through caring for those who are considered marginalized, even outcast, by the social norms of the day. And even those closest to him have not really gotten the message. Now, as Jesus draws closer and closer to his destiny, it is becoming more and more apparent that he needs to ratchet up his teachings. The disciples—those who will be expected to carry on his ministry after his death—still have a lot to learn. Today, Jesus gets pretty explicit as to what is expected of them. Yes, they can strive for greatness. But as his followers, greatness is determined by different metrics than those used by conventional society.

Sadly, 2,000 years later, in a place that professes to be a Christian nation, we still have not gotten the message. At least not on the scale that one would have hoped. In a world that still measures greatness by the size of one's bank account or by what extraordinary accomplishments one has achieved or by who one knows, the words "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all" sound like crazy talk.

But we in the church know differently. Anyone who has had the pleasure of engaging in any type of outreach ministry knows that true greatness lies not in fame and fortune, but in exercising acts of love and generosity. Particularly love and generosity toward those whom the rest of society would just as soon not see or hear or even think about, precisely because they represent the antithesis of greatness.

Our world is filled with those who are hurting, those who have lost hope. Would we prefer that there be no poverty, no homelessness, no illness? Of course. But the reality is that is not likely to happen any time soon. So rather than look at these as "problems" to be removed or to be hidden away, we can heed the words of Jesus—"Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all"—and view ministry to those on the edges of society as an opportunity for greatness. The greatness that comes by serving God who is manifest in the form of our sisters and brothers who are in need of God's love and care. Who are in need of our love and care.