Sermon for the 17th Sunday after Pentecost

September 19, 2021

Mark 9:30-37

The 12 disciples do not always come across well in the Gospels. They rarely seem to understand what Jesus was talking about. Jesus scolded them more than once for their lack of faith.

They occasionally got distracted by worldly concerns, as we see in our Gospel text for today.

And last week.

Mark, in fact, never attributes them with faith. Which doesn’t bode well for those who spent *so much time* traveling with Jesus, and listening to him teach, and witnessing the miracles he did.

Still. Jesus never gave up on them. Instead, he kept trying to find new ways to connect with them.

Three times, Jesus tells the 12 that he will die. Three times, Jesus tries to prepare them for what’s coming.

And all three times, they respond with fear and change the subject. Which—let’s be honest—is a completely understandable reaction. Who among us wants to hear that a person we care about is going to suffer? For that matter, who among *us* actually wants to spend more than a few seconds contemplating just how painful Jesus’ death was?

The first time Jesus tries to prepare them for his death, Peter dares to rebuke Jesus. Which always amazes me.

Jesus’ response affirms what we read in Isaiah 55: our ways are not God’s ways, our thoughts are not like God’s thoughts.

Peter was only thinking about Jesus from his limited human perspective. But Jesus could see the bigger picture.

The second time Jesus brings it up, the 12 are afraid to admit they don’t understand what he says. Instead of asking, they talk about other things. Again demonstrating that they are still more in tune with earthly things than what Jesus has been trying to teach them all along.

And the third time? James and John decide it’s the right time to approach Jesus and ask him if they can sit next to him in his glory.

One might be tempted to wonder if Jesus sometimes considered sneaking away and finding new followers.

Until we remember that we do the same things.

We sit here, or we sit in our homes, and we read Scripture. We read and hear about Jesus telling us to love our enemies, but we speak ill of others with alarming ease. We read Jesus’ words that tell us that if we have 2 cloaks we should give one away. That tell us not to store up treasures on earth. And we get a storage unit because we run out of room in our houses.

We hear Jesus tell us he came to serve, not to be served, that whoever wants to be first must be last and servant to all. And we continue to ignore the needs of today’s version of the poor, the widow, and the orphan.

Like the 12, we get distracted by worldly concerns, by our personal desires, and drift away from our path of discipleship.

Jesus needed to prepare the 12 for what lay ahead for all of them. He needed them to move past their earthly thinking, past their fear to faith. So they could trust that when he died, it wasn’t the end.

By deciding this was too much to contemplate, the disciples failed to remember that God has a history of working through suffering to bring about a new and better thing.

And Jesus’ death on the cross is the ultimate example of that.

In the crucifixion, Jesus bore all kinds of suffering. Abandonment, betrayal, shame, injustice, humiliation, and physical pain.

But the resurrection turned what had been a symbol of oppression and tyranny into a symbol of salvation and mercy and love.

Jesus’s life and ministry and teachings demonstrate what a life of discipleship looks like for *us*, and show us what the kingdom of God is all about.

And a big part of that is taking us broken humans and making us whole.

Because, as St. John reminds us, Jesus came not to condemn the world, but so that we might have abundant life through him.[[1]](#footnote-1)

And that abundant life is meant to start in the here and now, not be just a distant, someday thing we get in the afterlife. The things that God values are things we’re meant to be working on *now*, rather than just rest in the promise that *someday* everyone will have enough and all people will know peace.

*That’s* what discipleship is—working to make our prayer, “your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven,” be more reality than wishful thinking.

Mark’s gospel makes it clear for us that discipleship is not easy. It is inherently at odds with the way the world works.

Our faith insists that we value other humans based not on their earthly status and wealth, but on being created in the image of God.

And in the kingdom of God, the first are last. The last are first.

This top-to-bottom reversal was at odds with the way society was ordered 2000 years ago, and it continues to be at odds with what the world values today.

What God is asking of us as disciples is to see how God’s ways are not our ways, and then to work to change *our* hearts and minds so that *we* are participating in God’s redeeming work in the world, embracing God’s ways, rather than upholding the status quo.

We’re asked to see that discipleship isn’t just about *what* we do. It’s also about how we situate ourselves *in* the world—how we regard ourselves and, by extension, how we regard others.

Jesus didn’t give up on the 12, even when they were clueless, even when they were more concerned with their own status and honor than with what he was trying to teach them. And not even after they betrayed and abandoned him.

The 12 did good things. They didn’t always get things right—I’m looking at you, Judas—but they tried. And before Jesus shared his last meal with them, he washed *all* of their feet. He gave *all* of them the bread and wine.

And he knew what was coming.

I don’t know about you, but that’s comforting for me. It helps me remember that God doesn’t give up on us, either. Even when we’re clueless. Or when we get distracted by worldly concerns. Or when we fall short. Which happens a lot.

Thanks be to God for the promise of unending mercy and patience and love. May we strive to live our lives as a continual thanksgiving for the blessings we have received.

1. John 3:17, John 10:10 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)