

Proverbs 31: 10-31

Psalm 1

James 3:13-4:3, 7-8a

Mark 9:30-37

Sometimes I feel sorry for the disciples, especially in Mark's gospel. He has a strong tendency to portray them in the poorest light possible. In fact, it is often said that in Mark's version of the Gospel story, the only thing the disciples of Jesus ever do right is leave their nets to follow him in the first place.

What are we to make of the fact that the disciples just never seem to understand what Jesus is trying to teach them? Even though they make up his most private inner circle, the disciples seem to be the last to understand that he is the Messiah. Even the demons figure it out before they do. In the Gospel of Mark alone we hear that the disciples are infuriating, exasperating, dumb, hypocrites, uncaring, disrespectful, arrogant, faithless, petty and cowards. And the other synoptic gospels aren't much more charitable towards them. But what if the gospel writers are doing this not to personally disparage the individuals, but to show us just how much of a struggle it is to meet the aspirations Jesus has for us? All sorts of things get in the way our ability to be the people we know Jesus wants us to be. But the very low bar set by the disciples means that every single one of us can see that our struggles are accepted and we are never, ever, abandoned. Jesus throws up his hands in frustration, but he never gives up. Thanks be to God, there's hope for us!

Today's reading includes two examples of what frustrates Jesus about the disciples. First, they don't understand his teaching but are afraid to ask questions. Then they get caught up in an argument among themselves about who is the greatest. It really is enough to make you shake your head wondering about the hiring criteria for those chosen to be the voice and strength and love of Jesus when he's gone!

In this story, Jesus is taking time away from all the others who are hungry for his message so that he can focus on teaching the disciples. Specifically, the lesson is that he will be handed over to the authorities who will kill him, and three days after being killed, he will rise again. Then Mark tells us that the disciples did not understand him. And they were afraid to ask him for clarification. Why?

Perhaps they fear how Jesus will react if they question him. It does seem that Jesus is sort of tough on this group of twelve who were probably, like us, doing the best they could. He's tough, but he's also not the kind of teacher who would criticize a sincere desire for understanding. But the disciples never get to a true level of understanding of who Jesus is, and

this fear may be part of the reason. But another part of the reason seems to be that the question they are most concerned with is not “How can I better understand and live out Jesus’ identity and mission?” but rather, “How can I be the greatest?” That’s what was consuming their attention as they passed through Galilee. And so we have another “why?” Why were they trying to become the teacher’s pet of a Teacher who refused to play favorites and just wanted them all to be equipped for ministry?

Perhaps they are focused on their own status because they fear they have fallen in how Jesus regards them. In the text just before today’s reading the disciples did fail to exorcize the evil spirit from a boy and Jesus admonishes them as being an “unbelieving generation.” He blames their failure on lack of prayer before attempting to heal the boy. Perhaps they blamed each other when Jesus chastised them so they felt the need to compete with one another to regain his approval.

Whatever the reason, the argument about who is the greatest served only to make them all look small. And so Jesus tries again. He brings in a child, not to teach us to love the little children. That’s a different lesson. He uses a child because in the culture of the time, children were of little value in terms of achieving power and status. Jesus is not saying “be innocent like a child” he is saying “love the one who has nothing to offer you in return.” The message is “stop thinking about yourselves all the time.” “Look beyond your own needs and fears.” “You are going to be my hands, my feet, the face of my love. Please understand this!”

God has said “yes” to us and that’s where we need to live from. We spend so much effort on survival and security and achieving, and we pay lip service to a God of abundance. Fear of not being enough, of not having enough, of not striving hard enough all blind us to the abundance that surrounds us. Focusing on the abundance, through prayer and intentional practices of gratitude, opens our eyes and hearts to touch and see and experience and *know* that God is still at work, not vanquishing our fears but keeping us from being overwhelmed by them and helping us move forward in faith. Think of it as having a resilient spirit. Spirit is different from religiosity or theology. A resilient spirit is a deep knowing that we are connected to each other by something bigger than we are and that “something” is grounded in love.

Presiding Bishop Michael Curry published a pastoral message on the 20th anniversary of September 11. I think a portion of his message is especially relevant today. He said, “While 20 years have passed [since 9/11], I also want us to pause and remember the days that followed these tragic events. There was a moment in the aftermath when people came together. We were praying, grieving, and also working together. Because in that moment, however fleeting it was, we knew with immediacy and vulnerability that we need God, and we need each other.”

The message of today's gospel is that where we are most needed is where there is least to be gained. For that is the same place where everything that means anything is to be found.