

Edina Morningside Community Church
United Church of Christ
Sunday, September 20, 2015
Rev. Howard K. Bell
Servant of All

We have several stories from both our texts today that may give us important and valuable guidance for our future – within our world and within our faith community. First, Today's scripture from James Chapter 3 verse 17 says: *"..the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy."* There are powerful words and counter-cultural images. How different might our world be if these words of wisdom were followed by world leaders? Can we even imagine a world where the leaders are peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy.

As we move forward into our interim ministry time together – where differences of opinion will be sought out and necessary in order to come to specific goals for our mission and vision - it may be important to keep these words in our hearts and minds. Will those who disagree with decisions that are made be willing to yield? Will all of us be gentle with one another, especially those who disagree with us? Will we continually be willing to seek God's wisdom over our own?

Let us look now for more guidance from today's text from Mark. Our text begins with the Chapter 9 verse 30. Earlier in Chapter 9 Mark tells the story of the Transfiguration of Jesus. As you may recall, Jesus separated out three of his disciples – Peter, James and John – and invited them to the top of a high mountain. "And there appeared to them Elijah and Moses; and they were talking to Jesus." (Mark 9: 4) The response of these three disciples is, once again, a response of fear. Mark says, "They were exceedingly afraid." (Mark 9:6) We are not told specifically what is the cause of their fear. But it is common in our scriptures for any human being who encounters such a spiritual presence to have a human response of fear. We can imagine several possible reasons for their fear: fear of the unknown; fear as awe; fear of their own sanity; or even fear that this entire experience could be lost or discounted as only their imagination. This must have been a deeply moving spiritual experience for the three disciples. They must have also felt that they were blessed to have been chosen to witness this powerful experience, maybe even more blessed than the other disciples. Yet, as they descended the mountain, Jesus "charged them to tell no one what they had seen." (Mark 9: 9) How challenging it must have been for Peter, James and John to not be allowed to speak of what they had witnessed. I know, for me, it is in the telling of the story, that the memory is made even more real. Yet, these three disciples were not only denied that opportunity and were also denied the opportunity to make claims regarding their superiority over the other disciples.

Today's text reads: *"They went on from there and passed through Galilee. He did not want anyone to know it; for he was teaching his disciples, saying to them, 'The Anointed One is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him, and three days after being killed, he will rise again.' But they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him."*

(Mark 9:30-32) This section of our text suggests that one reason for Jesus wanting secrecy is his need to be away from the crowds and to have the full attention of his disciples. He was, once again, attempting to help them know what kind of messiah he was – one that would be betrayed to human hands, one that would be killed and, yet, one who would rise again. Even though Jesus had their full attention, the scripture tells us not only that they did not understand what he was saying, but also, they were afraid to ask about these sayings.

I found myself drawn to the question of what is the cause of this fear? Is it possible that they really did understand what he told them? Is it possible that the idea of being witnesses to Jesus being betrayed and killed is simply too much for them to even allow into their imagination. Or are they also fearful for what might happen to them as followers of Jesus? Or is it all just too much to be absorbed?

Biblical commentator, Sharon H. Ringe, explains the disciples' fear in this way: "*The disciples' inability to understand this teaching is a problem not of complex grammar or obscure vocabulary, but rather of a fate they can not fathom or accept.*"¹ Rather than judging the disciples, I hope that we also see that it is difficult for us to fathom the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. Our barriers to understanding may not be the same as the disciples. Our barriers may be that we are slaves to science, or slaves to rational thought, or slaves to our lack of faith; or slaves to our inability to believe in miracles. Hopefully, however, each of us as Christians, are choosing to live as if we believe, are choosing to ask the questions we need to ask for today, and are choosing to live our lives in community of others on this journey.

Even though the disciples were afraid to speak with Jesus, they could not contain themselves from speaking among themselves. As they arrive at the house, Jesus asks, "*What were you discussing on the way?*" (Mark 9:33). The disciples do not answer his question. We are told that they were silent. Eugene Patterson' version in *The Message* is: "The silence was deafening—they had been arguing with one another over who among them was greatest." (Mark 9: 34)

Commentator Ringe, again, offers her perspective: "*Jesus has caught them in an argument over who is the greatest. Competition for power, wealth, and prestige infected all of the cultures included in the Roman Empire (as it does the cultures of the modern world), and apparently the disciples shared in those values.*"²

I agree with Ringe's assessment of today's culture. Competition for power, wealth and prestige seems to be the dominant value both in our country and throughout the world. The political process that we see displayed throughout the media during this season provide ample evidence of this seduction. All of us, as participants in this culture are not immune to the seduction of power, wealth and prestige. And what does Jesus, in our text, offer us to counter these values?

¹ Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary - Feasting on the Word – Year B, Volume 4: Season After Pentecost 2 (Propers 17-Reign of Christ).

² Ibid

The next part of our text gives us two core teachings of Jesus. In addition to Jesus wanting the disciples to understand what type of messiah he was and what was going to happen to him, he also wanted them to understand what type of disciples they needed to be – and what type of disciples we need to be. *“He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, “Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.”* (Mark 9: 35-37)

Rather than competing in the world for power or for wealth or for prestige, Jesus here alerts his disciples and us, today, to the value in God’s realm that those who seek to be first shall be last and servant of all. Again, turning for perspective to Commentator Ringe: *“The person who was “servant of all” was the lowest in rank of all of the servants—the one who would be allowed to eat only what was left after everyone else had eaten their fill.”*³

What might this teaching mean for us today? I do not believe this teaching means that we must allow others to have power over us or to be submissive, especially when being submissive, means opening ourselves to abusive situations or to being taken advantage of. I believe the core reason for us to seek to be last, is in order for us to be willing to be the “servant of all”. I am very fond of a saying from Rev. Michael Piazza, who consulted with this church during your ReVision process. When speaking of how to re-vitalize churches, Rev. Piazza says that it is necessary for us to take off our bibs and put on our aprons. The revitalized church of the future, Piazza says, must come to see their core mission as one of service – service to those people who are on the margins of society; service to those who are impoverished, homeless and hungry; service to those facing injustice.

The second core teaching in our text comes from Mark 9: 36 – 37: *“Then he took a little 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.”*

Theologian Barbara Lundblad says: *“Jesus wanted them to see the child. He wants us to see the child, too--and welcome the child. Not because the child is innocent or perfect or pure or cute or curious or naturally religious. Jesus wanted them to welcome the child because the child was at the bottom of the social heap. Jesus brings the child from the margins into the very center. This child is not a symbol but a person, a little person easily overlooked, often unseen and unheard.”*⁴

Our vision statement says that *“we joyously rise to the challenge of living Jesus Christ’s example”*. This is the example of Jesus from today. Jesus did not seek power, wealth or prestige in his life. He was a servant to all. Jesus welcomed the outcast into the center of his life and ministry. Jesus is teaching us to do the same. May it be so. Amen.

³ Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary - Feasting on the Word – Year B, Volume 4: Season After Pentecost 2 (Propers 17-Reign of Christ

⁴ The Rev. Dr. Barbara K. Lundblad - A Hopeful Fanatic – www.Day1.org