

Sept. 19, 2021 Pent 17B

Mark 9:30-37

Following Jesus When You Don't Understand.

One of the things that jumps out at me as we read the Gospel lesson today is verse 32: *"But they did not understand what he meant and were afraid to ask him about it."* They didn't understand and they were afraid to ask him about it. But if you keep reading in Mark's Gospel, you see that they just keep following. They don't understand. They're afraid. And they just keep following Jesus. There is something for us to learn there.

If I could reduce this sermon down to just a few sentences (which is always a temptation), it would be this. We need to stop pretending we understand everything. No one likes a know-it-all. We need to recognize there is a lot about Jesus that we don't understand. In that regard, heaven will be full of surprises. We are going to make mistakes. But let's just keep following Jesus without understanding everything, sometimes afraid, and when we make mistakes let's make sure we are making them on the side of loving God and loving our neighbor.

I could say "Amen" right there and stop the sermon. But you know I won't. So let's dig in. *"But they did not understand what he meant and were afraid to ask him about it."*

One of the unique things about Mark's gospel is the disciples' lack of understanding. At times, the disciples are depicted as confused, challenged, and even discouraged by Jesus' exhortations and teachings. That's what we are seeing in today's reading. Mark reports that after Jesus predicts His suffering, death and resurrection, the disciples did not understand what He was saying to them and were afraid to ask.

This isn't the first time the disciples have heard Jesus predict these events. In the eighth chapter of Mark, Jesus forecasts the same thing, and He is rebuked by Peter. Jesus responds by rebuking Peter himself and saying, "Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on heavenly things but on human things" (Mark 8:33).

To understand the disciples' incomprehension, their fear of asking Jesus to explain Himself, and their argument over who among them is the greatest,

we need to understand the disciples' state of mind as previously diagnosed by Jesus: their minds are not set on heavenly things but on human things.

The disciples have left behind their families, their professions, and all they owned to follow Jesus. They have seen Jesus heal the sick, cast out demons, and give life to the dead. And they have personally found a new purpose, a new mission in life as followers of Jesus. But now, Jesus seems to be saying to them that all of this, everything they have witnessed, will soon come to an end.

The disciples cannot wrap their heads around what Jesus is saying, not because they believe Jesus is exempt from suffering and death, but because they believe that His death will mark the end of their lives as they have known them. They fear losing their dear friend and beloved teacher, and they fear losing themselves in the process. The threat of Jesus' death was exactly that, a threat.

However, if we look at Jesus' words to the disciples, we see that Jesus does not solely predict His suffering and death but His resurrection on the third day. There seems to be a disconnect between what Jesus is saying and what the disciples hear. Did the disciples stop listening to Jesus after the first half of the sentence? Was their anxiety so intense that they shut down and could not hear anything after the mention of death? Were they not curious about Jesus' resurrection? Was their fear so great that it caused them to not ask any more questions? Did they immediately grasp the earthly thing that they could understand (death) and overlook the heavenly thing that they couldn't understand (resurrection)? That makes some sense to me. If someone told me that I was going to go through a procedure that caused me to be dead for three days and then come back to life, I'm pretty sure my real focus would be on the dead part.

These questions are hypothetical and cannot be answered, but it seems like Jesus' words were not only difficult to hear but haunting. The disciples are not only confused but at a loss for words, not among each other, but toward Jesus. We're told that on their journey to Capernaum, Jesus overheard the disciples arguing about who among them was the greatest – a topic of discussion the disciples were too embarrassed or afraid to have Jesus hear them discuss. When asked by Jesus, "What were you arguing about on the way?" the disciples remained silent. Maybe it was that when confronted with something they couldn't understand, they turned to

something they could understand—their own greatness. However, Jesus knew what they were arguing about, just as He knew about the disciples' confusion and fear after hearing Him speak on His suffering, death, and resurrection.

But rather than giving the disciples a long explanation or entering into a long discourse or offering them a new teaching, Jesus acts out a parable. Jesus takes a child and puts the child among the disciples, and taking the child into his arms, Jesus tells his disciples, "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me." To understand what Jesus is trying to do here, to grasp what He is trying to convey and teach the disciples by elevating a child in their midst, we need to first understand the role of children in the ancient world.

In his commentary on the Gospel of Mark, Professor Eugene Boring writes, "In the first-century Mediterranean world, the characteristic feature of children was not thought to be their innocence, but their lack of status and legal rights. Jesus is not teaching a lesson about being child-like but speaking to the issue of status. Embracing children, contrary to their cultural evaluation as nonpersons with no 'rights,' was characteristic of Jesus and early Christianity, who accepted the least and the lowly without asking what benefit they could receive from such people. Placing a child in their midst, Jesus speaks directly to the disciples. The child is not a prop or visual aid for a lesson Jesus wants to teach but belongs with the congregation; those who receive [even a child] receive Jesus, and those who receive Jesus receive the one who sent him."

The disciples' fear and uncertainty over Jesus' suffering and death, and their subsequent dispute over who among them is the greatest, is suddenly disrupted. Jesus brings a child in their midst, amid their concerns and disputes, and reminds them what it means to be one of his disciples. To be a disciple of Jesus is above all a way of being in this world. It is a posture that holds and bears the beauty and complexity of human life, and yet has the strength and space to welcome others as we have been welcomed by Jesus. To be a disciple of Jesus means creating enough space in our hearts and minds to welcome those who seek to see Jesus and are in need of the Good News. At times, it requires that we put ourselves aside, our accomplishments and aspirations, so that we may offer the same

hospitality, love, and grace that Jesus offers us. But it also means not being afraid to be child-like, turning to others when we find ourselves in need of the Good News when we find ourselves in need of Jesus and cannot seem to feel his presence in the world.

To be a disciple of Jesus is to set our hearts and minds on heavenly things and not on human things. But in Jesus, divinity and humanity have met and have become one; and we follow Jesus Christ who is true God and true man, who understands the complexities of human life and yet demands more of us. He demands that we remain faithful to him, all while knowing that, at times, his way will lead us to confusion and suffering, and ultimately the cross – but that is never where the story ends. We know that there is a third day. A day of resurrection lies ahead for all of us who believe and follow in his way. For now, our job is to remain faithful to him who promises to be with us during the hardships of life and to make all things new. There is no need to worry who among us is the greatest when we have a God who is our helper and sustainer.

So let's follow Jesus without understanding all the heavenly things He has in mind. We will make mistakes. But let's sure we make those mistakes loving God and loving our neighbor.