

The Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 20, Year B)
September 19, 2021
Trinity Capitol Square
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+In the Name of God: who was, and is, and is to come. Amen.

Then they came to Capernaum; and when Jesus was in the house he asked them, ‘What were you arguing about on the way?’ But they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another about who was the greatest. Mark 9:33, 34

This morning’s Gospel story is short – it’s only seven verses long – but it’s packed with information. That’s pretty typical of the stories Mark tells. He’s an evangelist of few words – economical, if not stingy with language. And he moves his Gospel narrative right along, describing Jesus’ life and ministry almost breathlessly. “And then this happened. And then that happened. And then Jesus healed the sick, and fed the 5,000, and walked on water. And then, and then, and then!” One thing right after another.

I’m not sure why Mark was in such a hurry when he wrote his Gospel. Maybe he was that sort of person: direct, to the point, matter of fact. Or maybe he felt a great sense of urgency about the task he’d undertaken. What may have driven him was his need to share the Good News with a fragile faith community facing enormous challenges. Mark knew that very soon the little church would be tested by persecution, suffering, and even death. Perhaps the community was already being tested in these ways when Mark sat down to write.

Today’s passage from the ninth chapter of the Gospel tells how Jesus took his disciples on a walking retreat. Mark says that “they went on from there and passed through Galilee.” Jesus and the disciples were returning from the mountain where Jesus had been transfigured – a place some distance away – to Capernaum – the little fishing village by the Sea of Galilee that served as a base of operations during the first part of Jesus’ ministry. Some think Jesus had a house there. Whether he did or he didn’t, he spent a lot of time teaching and healing in Capernaum.

However many hours it took them to travel to Capernaum, Jesus insisted that the trip be spent with only his disciples. Mark writes that Jesus “did not want anyone to know” where he was or that he was teaching his disciples. By “anyone”, Mark meant the crowds of people that congregated wherever Jesus went – the crowds who came to hear him preach and to be healed of their afflictions.

By “anyone” Mark also meant the growing pack of critics and detractors – the Sadducees who came from Jerusalem to see what this young rabbi was all about – and the Pharisees and scribes who kept track of all the times Jesus flaunted the Law by healing on the Sabbath, by forgiving sinners, and by sharing meals with those they deemed to be unclean or unworthy.

Jesus wanted there to be no distractions on this trip. No outside pressures. No press of the crowds. No demands. Just time with the twelve he had chosen – the ones who would help him proclaim that God’s kingdom had finally drawn near – the ones whose lives would be transformed so that others might catch a glimpse of the world as God intended it to be,

Somehow Jesus succeeded. He got those who were closest to him apart for a little while. And Jesus used the opportunity to speak to them again about his death and resurrection. This is the second week in a row our Gospel reading contains this prediction, and what Jesus says in today’s lesson is pretty much the same thing he said last week. Both times he tells the disciples that: “The Son of Man will be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him, and three days after being killed, he will rise again.”

Notice the disciples' reactions to this news in each case. After the first prediction, it was Peter who took Jesus aside and took him to task for saying he would suffer and die. "Don't talk like that, Jesus. This isn't what's supposed to happen to the Messiah. This isn't how the story goes." After the second prediction in this week's Gospel, there's no one who rebukes Jesus. Instead, the disciples simply seem baffled. Mark says, "they did not understand what he was saying." What's more, the disciples are afraid to ask any questions. Who knows what's going on with them? Maybe they don't want to understand this message about a Messiah who suffers and dies. Maybe they're afraid to reveal their ignorance. Maybe they remember how Jesus rebuked Peter at Caesarea Philippi and want to avoid the same humiliation. Who among them would want to be identified with Satan, the adversary of God, as Peter had been? In any case, their fear of asking any questions meant that they remained ignorant and confused.

To top it all off, the disciples spend the rest of this walking retreat arguing with one another. We can only imagine how Jesus felt at this point. He had made a special effort to get the disciples off by themselves. He had somehow managed to preserve this time with them from intrusion and interruption. He had, once again, told them what lies ahead for him – betrayal, suffering, death, . . . and resurrection – hoping to help get them all on the same page, have them be clear about his fate – have the same understanding. And what do they do? They argue.

Now there are lots of reasons people argue with one another, and there are a lot of things people argue about. Sometimes people argue because they have a conflict of ideas or beliefs. Sometimes it's a personal conflict – there's a mutual dislike or personality clash. Some argue because they think such verbal fencing is fun. (Not I, let me hasten to say!) Some argue to get closer to the truth, or to justice, or to insight, which may be a legitimate reason for arguing.

Business partners and marriage partners often argue about money, especially when there's not enough of it. If you tune into an all-sports talk radio program, you'll hear endless arguments over whether this team or that one is better – whether the trade made at the deadline was a good one or a bad one – whether the US women's soccer team should be paid the same as the men's team. . . or more – and whether or not the time has come for the Buckeyes to replace their defensive coordinator.

In our nation, our state, our city, towns, and school districts, what we are arguing about is a never-ending list of things: mask mandates vs. personal freedom, vaccines vs. anti-vaxxers, pro-choice vs. pro-life, free market capitalism vs. socialism . . . immigration, racism, health care, the Senate filibuster. Every single thing has been politicized, and battle lines have been drawn because, you see, as of today, there are only 415 days until the next Congressional election and only 1,142 days until the next presidential election. I don't know about you, but I'm still recovering from the last one!

Thank goodness there's the church, where we can find refuge from all the arguing!

Evidently not if today's Gospel lesson is any indication. Because the church – at least the founding members of the church – the ones Jesus called to be his disciples – they argued too. They didn't argue about hot-button political issues – although, who knows, perhaps there were disputes among them about what should be done about the Romans/ They didn't argue about money – though it's hard to imagine there weren't arguments about money among people who were living hand to mouth. No, what this group, hand-picked by Jesus, argued about was which one of them was the greatest.

Just imagine the scene. Jesus is leading the group, walking steadily along. Two or three disciples are walking with him on the road. Others are straggling behind in clumps of two or three. Jesus is talking to those who are closest to him, maybe explaining one of the parables. "Let me explain what I was getting at when I said, "A Sower went out to sow . . ." or "There was a man who had to sons, and he said to the first one, 'Go and work in the vineyard today . . .'"

The next group is discussing their dinner plans – what they will eat that night and where the food will come from. And there, toward the back, out of the earshot of Jesus was a group arguing over which of them was the greatest. “I am,” Peter says. “I was the first one who said Jesus was the Messiah. Jesus told me that I was the rock on which he would build his church.”

“No, we are,” James and John say. “He took us with him up on the mountain, and we witnessed his transfiguration – how his clothes became dazzling white. And besides, our mother spoke to Jesus and put in a good word for us. She requested that we be seated on the right and left hands of Jesus when he came into his kingdom.” Or Andrew: “I brought my brother, Peter, to Jesus, and then, when there were thousands of hungry people out in the middle of nowhere, I found the boy with the five barley loaves and two fish to Jesus so he could feed everyone.” I suspect every one of them could have come up with a reason why they were uniquely qualified to be the GOAT – the Greatest of All Time.

Whether Jesus overheard what they were talking about or not, we don’t know. What we do know is that he seems to have caught enough of the tone of their discussion to know that they were arguing about something and, knowing them as well as he did, I suspect he had a pretty good idea what the argument was about. But he didn’t address the situation right away. He kept walking and teaching all the way to Capernaum.

Finally, when he was in the house, he asked them, ‘What were you arguing about on the way?’ I’m sure you could have heard a pin drop at that moment. Mark writes, the disciples “were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another about who was the greatest.”

After a very long trip, during which Jesus had done his best to try to convey what kind of a Messiah he was going to be – after telling them plainly his words and actions would lead to a humiliating and public death – he gathered himself to make one more run at this with them – to see if he could get them to understand how God’s values were the opposite of what they thought was important. He sat down and summoned the Twelve to him again. “So, you want first place?” he said to them. “Then take the last place. Be the servant of all.” It’s not about being the greatest. It’s about being the least.

Then he set before them a living parable. He put a child in the middle of the room. Remember that, during the days of Jesus, children were considered second-class citizens, right along with tax collectors and sinners. Children were considered unproductive and burdensome. For Jesus to receive a child was to lower himself in the world’s eyes and to be considered foolish because of it. So when the disciples began to argue about who was the greatest, he set a child before them, saying, “Whoever receives one such child receives me and the one who sent me.”

What Jesus was saying to his disciples was this: If you want to receive the kingdom, you must receive a different kind of king. This king is not received by pomp and circumstance, but by humility and servitude; he is received by those who are willing to receive a child the way he did.

And Jesus is saying the same thing to us as well. I don’t know if putting a child in front of them helped the Twelve see alternatives to their childish attitudes – their self-centeredness, pettiness, rivalry, and overconfidence. What I do know is that this story got handed down to the next generation of Christians, and to the one after that, and the one after that , , , until it finally made its way to the desk where Mark was writing his Gospel. In other words, it became central to what it means to be a Christian. To be a Christian means to be a servant.

By including the story in his Gospel, Mark invites us to remember that “whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.” And Mark further invites us to remember some of the child-like attitudes we may have forgotten along the way: things like wonder, faith, simplicity, and trust. If we aspire to be great, this is the place to start.

Amen.