

September 23 – Pentecost +18

Jeremiah 11:18-20

<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Jeremiah+11:18-20>

Mark 9:30-37

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Last week we broke down our gospel reading into three sections and looked briefly at the significance of each one. First, we're faced with the question who do we say that Jesus is? Some of us declare that Jesus is the Messiah, even if, like Peter, we aren't all that sure what this means and entails. Next Jesus predicts His death, and we begin to understand that the following Jesus isn't meant to be equated with riches and success. The importance of the Messiah won't be displayed on the battlefield, or in the political arena, but rather through various acts of service and sacrifice both great and small. And last, we look at the way of the cross...an ongoing journey that leads to more contemplation, reflection, and hopefully transformation.

Jesus' death on the cross is much more than an explanation of atonement and sacrifice. It also represents God's unity with humanity in our suffering. It's forsaking everything to show us how deep God's love is for us. It is at the cross that grace and care are symbolized and embodied like never before. But the cross also represents a choice for us to put God ahead of ourselves. To forgive and love our enemies. To be considerate of those who are often not considered. The way of the cross means to follow Christ into the world rather than away from it. To love God and our neighbour, even though it requires us giving something up.

When we turn to this week's gospel reading there are some common themes with last week's. Again we see Jesus predicting His death, telling His disciples that He's going to be killed and will rise again three days later. Still the disciples don't understand what Jesus means for one reason or another, and it says that they were afraid to ask Him. Part of me wonders if they were afraid to ask Jesus what He meant because it might have confirmed their fears. That this man who they began following – giving up time with their family, leaving their jobs – this new teacher who many hoped and expected would be the next big deal...was going to die and would appear to leave His followers abandoned and worse off than when they had started. Can you imagine leaving the security of one job for another, getting promoted, only to find out a few months later that the company is going out of business.

Maybe that's a bit what it seemed like for the disciples. They're not thinking about Good Friday and Easter Sunday...maybe they're thinking I left everything for this new leader of Israel, and He's not even going to be around that much longer. And the disciples get into an argument along the journey. A little later on, when everyone's together at Capernaum, Jesus asks them, what were you arguing about on the way? And they're silent, there's no way any of them want to admit what they were chatting about, that they were actually debating who was the greatest among them. But it seems that Jesus already knows.

Jesus calls them closer, come here, sit down. And away from the crowds, away from the busyness of the people, Jesus has a quiet teaching moment with His disciples in somebody's house. "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all." What does that even mean? Remember now, this is the second time Jesus talks about His death. And when we looked at the first instance last week we said, the disciples begin to understand that following Jesus isn't

meant to be equated with riches and success. The significance of the Messiah isn't going to depend on his power or status, but on his acts of service and sacrifice both great and small.

And what happens next helps the disciples to reform their understanding of what Jesus means. He takes a little child and puts it among them. Jesus takes the child in His arms, and says "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me." In order to get a better sense of just how significant this is we have to place this story in the wider context of that time. And simply put, children were nobodies. They didn't contribute anything of value to their society. They were takers, not givers, without any status, power, or rights. They were among the most vulnerable in society, easily abused or mistreated, and essentially invisible and voiceless. But these are the kind of people Jesus values, Jesus sees.

Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me – whoever welcomes these helpless beings, who have no power, no money, no knowledge or wisdom or anything of value to offer, whoever welcomes someone like this welcomes me. That's a very profound claim Jesus makes. It's very deep, and requires reflection and thought. Perhaps this is why Jesus wanted to get away from the crowds – to give special focus and time on this one soul. On the importance of accepting and welcoming one such being.

What does it mean to be great? How do we define greatness? Maybe we think of imposing historical figures like Alexander the Great, Julius Caesar, or Napoleon – men whose military and political ambition and genius stand out far beyond others. Maybe we think of athletes like Usain Bolt or Wayne Gretzky – the Great One. Each of these athletes are great in the sense of their accomplishments and skill, in their ability to exceed and be more successful than their peers. But Jesus reframes the whole concept of greatness, and how to get there. It's not easy to embrace this concept, especially since our culture doesn't define greatness the same way. We value money, power, influence, not helplessness, or vulnerability. So where do we go from here?

If we look at the beginning of the passage in Mark, there's a pretty fascinating line, which we can skip over pretty quickly. Jesus tells the disciples "The Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him, and three days after being killed, he will rise again." But notice what it says next...it says that, they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him. Maybe we're exploring the passage in a way that better unfolds it and makes it easier to understand, but then again maybe we don't fully understand what Jesus is saying and we're afraid to say so! Maybe we're afraid to ask, Jesus what do you mean? What do you mean who wants to be first must be last? Isn't that a paradox? How would it look if we say we've been lifelong Christians, or following for a number of years and still don't understand what Jesus *really* means when He talks about taking up our cross and following Him, or welcoming children as being symbolic of accepting those who are most marginalized and vulnerable in our society. But perhaps instead of trying to look like we've got it all together and know all the answers, or worrying about how we might be seen, maybe we should embrace questions and uncertainty a little more. Perhaps we need to encourage more exploration. One question I have is how are we welcoming God into our presence? When I think about that little child standing around the adult disciples, I wonder if we are, how we are, welcoming the vulnerable in Jesus' name, which in turn as scripture says, is an act of welcoming the one who sent Jesus.

Because, as we've heard before, "there is no such thing as a stupid question." Perhaps it becomes easier to ask questions once we do acknowledge our limitations, and need for help, once we're able to admit that we don't know it all and aren't afraid of saying that. We don't want to look vulnerable or in need of help, but many of us can have a hard time when society values independence, self-sufficiency, being smart, and knowledgeable. How many of us have a hard time asking a sales associate where to find something in a store that we can't locate on our own? Who here this morning refuses to ask for directions when they're lost?

It's kind of crazy when you think about it right? Some of us would prefer to keep going the wrong way than to say to someone, I'm lost, I need help, can you please tell me how to get to such and such a place? Sometimes it's a fear that is debilitating and stagnating, not just in situations where you can't find which aisle the cranberry sauce is in, but in all areas of life. What happens when we are so concerned about our own image, our own status, that we don't ask questions? No one wants to look clueless, uninformed or confused. In the Gospel of Mark, Mark is constantly illustrating the disciples looking clueless, uninformed and confused. It's a theme that runs through the whole book, he is constantly highlighting the faults and feelings of the disciples. Remember Peter last week, who claims Jesus as the Messiah one moment, and then rebukes Him when He says that He has to die. And again this week we see Jesus telling His disciples that He will suffer and die, but rise again later....and then it says the disciples didn't understand what he was saying BUT they didn't ask him about it because they were afraid..... They didn't ask a question because they were afraid. Maybe they were afraid of the answers Jesus would tell them.....maybe they were worried they would be called to the same suffering that Jesus was talking about. Maybe they were upset that the leader they were following wasn't going to take them to the promised land. Maybe they were embarrassed. Maybe they thought...if we're this close to Jesus we can't look like we don't understand what He's talking about. I think we tend to equate intelligence with knowing things, because smart people seem to just know a lot and so we're afraid to ask questions because then it looks like we're not intelligent, that we don't know things. But we all face questions at some point. And when it comes to our faith...if we don't have questions we might not be paying attention. Even though Jesus tells His disciples He will rise again, they and all the witnesses to the empty tomb first react to the resurrection with doubt or unbelief. No one says....oh right, Jesus said He would rise three days later, we knew this was going to happen exactly like this! No they asked... how can it be? And said I don't believe? And the same goes for us.....if we don't have questions about our faith, about Jesus and about God let's pay closer attention. Even Jesus asked a question on the cross, my God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

We are forced to wrestle with God and ask questions about faith, God, the Bible, about life, and the church should be a place that affirms our questions and allows us to explore them as part of our faith. Questions are our friends. And greatness is not found in power but in compassion and service to others. Not according to status, or wealth, not by how many servants you have but by how many people you serve, and are willing to give something up for.

So today let's learn from the disciples' mistakes that Mark highlights. We can see that as we pay attention to where God is, and what God is doing, questions will arise; doubt and confusion are parts of faith, and we know that asking and even embracing questions doesn't make us look foolish or unintelligent, but can actually free us to live out and explore deep concepts that God wants us to, like welcoming the unwelcome, and affirming those less remembered or acknowledged. Maybe you have your own questions of faith, but let's also think

of some for our congregation as we approach a period of transition. What might it look like to have joint worship services more often? If we value children and intergenerational ministry, what might our service on the first Sunday of the month look like? Is it possible to do a joint Messy Church service where we welcome those who don't usually feel welcome here, but still crave community, friendship, and acceptance? Let's keep these questions in mind for our joint service next week, and be willing to explore others as well. Amen.