

Sermon – September 20, 2009

Afraid to Ask

James 3:13 - 4:8a

Mark 9:30-37

Let us Pray:

Breathe on us, breath of God, fill us with life anew, that we may love what you love and do what you would do. Breathe on us, breath of God, 'til we are wholly thine... until the earthly part of us glows with your fire divine. Breathe on us, breath of God...

When we worship together, we come to sing praises to the One who created us. We come to confess our failings and to receive assurance that Christ has set us free and loves us unconditionally. We come to be filled anew with the truth that the Holy Spirit breathes within us and longs to work through us. We come to be nourished in the Word ... the Word spoken and the Word made flesh, the Word here among us—as evident today, in the sacrament of Baptism ... We come, as little Scarlett has come this morning, to find our place in the story... To find our place in God's story... to hear how we also are part and participants in what God is up to in the world today... So breathe on us, Breath of God....

Today's lectionary reading continues with the Gospel of Mark. Not long ago, I was asked what my favorite Gospel is, and I replied, quite quickly – Mark. “Why?” came the second question. I thought about it for a moment or two and realized it's because, in this Gospel, I easily find myself in the story. I guess, deep down, I think the Gospel of Mark reflects me: it's sharp, and to the point, sometimes crudely blunt—that's a lot like me. I t

moves very quickly, scampering along from one action to the next—that's a lot like me.

And in it, the disciples are repeatedly dense and slow to get it—a lot like me.

The disciples are called and commissioned by Jesus. They're given special instructions at various points in their time with him, they are his closest companions and he takes time to draw away from the busy crowds to share intimate information with them only. And yet... they are so consistently inappropriate. They can be depended upon to misunderstand a great deal of what Jesus is teaching and doing. And the wonder of it all, is that these disciples—the ones who knew Jesus, who talked with him and walked with him, and broke bread with him, who drank wine with him, his buddies—they reflect me... they reflect you... all of us... who love Jesus, and who want to follow him, but who persist in setting our minds on human things, instead of divine things. Let's see what they're up to this time, as we read from the Gospel of Mark, chapter 9:30-37:

They went on from there and passed through Galilee. Jesus did not want anyone to know it; for he was teaching his disciples, saying to them, "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 they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him. Then they came to Capernaum and when he 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 who was the greatest. He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all." 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."

This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Jesus has taught and preached and revealed things about God's coming kingdom that has amazed and intrigued the disciples and crowds of others. He's healed people and set them

free from the demons that beset them. He's fed thousands on from a single lunch bag. But now, they're heading into home territory—Galilee. They're on their way back to Capernaum, where they started from, and Jesus begins to lead them by the back roads, through the fields, without letting anyone know their route. Jesus had some things to say that were for his closest friends only. For the very first time, he tells them what's ahead—he talks about his arrest, execution and resurrection. It's hard and incongruous news for the disciples to hear, but Jesus must have hoped they were ready to receive it. He wanted to prepare them for what was to come. Maybe he wanted to have a chance to talk about the meaning of it all – why it was necessary, what would come later. Maybe he hoped to receive some comfort and encouragement for his journey. But the disciples are strangely silent in response. They did not understand what he was saying, and were afraid to ask.

Have you ever been afraid to ask? I remember driving down the road with my boyfriend on vacation, hopelessly lost, and he threw the map out the car window in frustration – but would he stop to ask for directions? No! Of course, not!! I still remember with agonizing clarity sitting in the 7th grade, as the principles of algebra and trigonometry were presented. The teacher asked “Any questions?” but all she got back were blank stares, and no one raised a hand, for fear of being the only dummy in class. As the old saying goes, better to keep your mouth shut and be thought a fool, than open it and remove all doubt.

Sometimes—I suspect quite often—we don't ask because we're afraid of the answer. We are afraid to ask. We suspect what we will hear will change our lives forever, and we're just not ready for that.

The disciples, on hearing Jesus speak for the first time about his arrest, execution, and resurrection, must have wondered at it all. How did he know he was going to die? What kind of a Messiah were they following? What would his death mean to them? But... they were afraid to ask.

I wonder how long they continued down the road in silence before the argument started. I can see Jesus, leading the way, a little out in front, perhaps disappointed that the disciples weren't able to receive his words. Maybe he was out of ear-shot—but I doubt it. When they arrive in Capernaum, and go inside the house—inside the place where only the insiders go—Jesus says... So... what were you discussing back there? He's not afraid to ask. He's not afraid to ask the question that will expose their inner thoughts, their true values, their fear of change and challenge, their ignorance of God's way. And once again, the disciples are silent... They may not understand Jesus, but they know enough to be embarrassed by the realization that their argument about who among them is the greatest is completely at odds with what Jesus is about.

He doesn't reprimand them. He simply sits down. In Mark, the rabbi—the teacher—always sits down to say the important stuff. It's a position of authority. Listen closely, you all. You want to be the greatest? It's not what you think. You want a Messiah? He's not what you think, either. In a few simple words, Jesus answers their

argument about greatness and their confusion about his death. He redefines greatness. The measuring stick of success and failure, winning and losing, first and last, is flipped upside down.

That's what James did too—in that letter that David read earlier. James flips the whole system on its ear. "Who is wise and understanding among you?" he asks. Who are the great ones? Who are the ones who get it? Not those who are ambitious or boastful—not at all! James offers up a wisdom that is completely alternative to the wisdom of the world—the wisdom of our world—a world where winning seems to come at the expense of common human civility. A world where respectful debate has given way to shouting and shooting. A world where the one who shouts loudest—or the one who shouts "Liar!"—is considered right.

In contrast to that, James points to the wisdom that comes as a gift from God: wisdom that is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, reasonable, merciful, spirit-filled, willing to yield, treating others with dignity and honor. You don't have that kind of wisdom? You don't have it because you didn't ask. Or you ask, but you don't really want the answer you know God gives. You know it will change your life and you're still trying to live according to the standards of the world. But that's impossible—that's like pretending to be God's lover, while you're having an affair with the world on the side. That's adultery—that's what James says. But when your motives are pure—when your heart is true—when you want to live in God's kingdom—then it's a pretty simple equation. Draw near to God and God will draw near to you. All you have to do is ask.

When Jesus' disciples were all caught up in arguing about who was going to get the best seat at the messianic banquet—all caught up in envy, ambition and boasting—Jesus reminds them again of the way God works. The first is the last. The last will be first. The greatest one is the least. The least is the greatest. Not the way of the world at all.

And then, because he's sure by now that the disciples really don't get it, Jesus takes a child of the household—small, dependent, powerless and considered a total non-entity in that day and age. I'm sure before this moment, she was completely ignored by the disciples—but Jesus reaches out as she toddles by and gathers her into his arms. Jesus lifts her onto his lap and into their focus while he illustrates the Way to greatness. Welcome this little one in my name—this powerless, inconsequential, overlooked and discounted child. Stoop down from your ambition to offer welcome to this least of the least and in doing so, you welcome me. Welcome me, and you welcome no less a one than God.

It can be daunting sometimes to find your place in the story—to see yourself in God's narrative and know that you are more like the dense disciples wrestling for recognition than like the little child wrapped in Jesus' arms. But I find encouragement in the letter from James that says that there is hope for all of us disciples—for the wisdom that is from above—the wisdom that is first pure, then peaceable, merciful and gentle—the wisdom that reflects Christ to the world—is a gift from God, given from above in answer to prayer. It will change your life. It will change the church. It will change the world. Let's not be afraid to ask.