Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost September 19, 2021

All Saints Church Proper 20/Year B

Jeremiah 11:18-20 James 3:13-4:3, 7-8a

Psalm 54 Mark 9:30-37

Dear Lord, bless all the spaces between us.

I’d like to begin this morning by defending the disciples.

They believe in Jesus- they are full of vigor and faith. They are following a dynamic leader, whom they have identified, rightly so, as the Messiah, and they are committing themselves to trusting in him and all that he can do… through his teaching, and his healing, and his confronting the powers to be. He is going to save them from Roman occupation and rise up the nation of Israel to be a people free and autonomous. Alleluia.

Why wouldn’t they think this? Their theology teaches them that if you believe in God, the underdog will win. Moses confronted Pharoah and delivered his people into the Promise Land. David overpowered Goliath. Esther saved Israel from an evil king, and women of the desert, Jael and Judith, defeated warring generals. These are just a few examples of the most unlikely of leaders, who, through their belief/their faith in God’s deliverance, accomplished the impossible. With God on your side, you can do anything.

So, the disciples just have to believe and trust that God has their back; Jesus is their man of the hour; and liberation will come.

So, please Jesus, no talk of dying. That makes no sense. And even though, you keep repeating yourself, we’ll just pretend we don’t understand. We’re definitely not going to ask any clarifying questions. Be patient. Jesus will come around.

I’m with them on this; I think many of us would be.

And so, they are debating who is the greatest among them. To be fair, they are wondering who among them reflects the best image of God that they all have: powerful, omnipotent, in control, ruler of all, and judge, with a lightening bolt of accuracy against the unrighteous. Who fits the bill best? Who best manifests god-powers?

So, they are arguing. They don’t understand, yet, that their image of God tells them much more about who they are than who God is. Their image of God is forming them to be a people who will be limited to human standards of greatness. To be “great” often invites greed, pettiness, fear, hypocrisy, power-plays and threats. To be great and fight for it, mirrors the truth that absolute power corrupts absolutely.

The saving grace here, is that Mark tells his readers (us) that they are arguing while they are “on the way” which is code for “setting your face to Jerusalem.” “On the way” means that you are following Jesus “on the way” to the cross. To be “on the way” means that you have committed to a life that serves and loves, that the first will be last, and that you need to give up your life, to gain it. As Saint Paul was beginning his ministry, he referred to Christians as people “on the way.”

So, I love the irony. The disciples are caught up in their own reality of who God is and who they are, and meanwhile they are “on the way,” following Jesus, which will change them forever. It gives me hope, that even when I am completely sidetracked, God is keeping me, keeping all of us, “on the way.”

Jesus sees all of this, of course. And as they arrive in Capernaum and tuck into a house, it’s time for him to teach. (In the gospel of Mark, Jesus often teaches in houses).

They admit that they have been arguing about who is the greatest. Mind you, they think this is a fine argument to have, righteous even, because they are just trying to decide who best emulates God’s attributes. That’s a worthy cause, no?

Imagine Jesus sighing, as he puts a child of the home in the center of their gathering…. In the middle of their debate. The child is not about the wisdom of children, or that children matter, or that they are precious in our sight. Nothing like we are going to honor when we baptize Jenna in a few minutes.

Children, in ancient societies were seen as burdens until they grew up. And many did not make it to adulthood- facts of life’s cruelties. Jesus puts a child in the disciples’ midst to say, “your sense of self must be rooted in the indignity of powerlessness.” The child cannot exist without the help of others. This dependent, helpless child is a key to understanding your relationship with God. You too cannot exist without God. And that existence has nothing to do with power and everything to do with love. Notice that Jesus takes the child in his arms and hugs him.

“Whoever welcomes one such child in my name, welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me, welcomes not me but the one who sent me.”

It’s a cosmic reversal of what the disciples have been taught: The Kingdom of God is recognized in suffering; authorized by servanthood; and welcomed through powerlessness. No wonder the disciples rebel… this can’t be right!

When Jesus talks about this, he is not giving us a “new theology.” He is naming reality. There’s a truth her that transcends Christianity. One is great, only if combined with humility, surrender and love. This truth is rooted in many religious traditions, but it also transcends any religious tradition. It’s just true.

Jesus experienced this when he changed (Jesus was in constant relationship with God). When he compared the Samaritan woman to a dog when she was looking for healing for her daughter, Jesus saw her out of the scope of his ministry. But then the scales dropped, and he saw her as a mother in need and as a part of his world. She was no longer “outside” his tribe, and he healed her daughter. No one is outside of God’s reach. Jesus was converted to this truth!

In my very first year teaching, I had difficult students. I’m sure much of the difficulty rested in my need to be in control (no doubt), though they were difficult. I had one student in particular who was a huge cut up in class, and often took us off of my lesson plan.

I was so upset by his antics (he had a lot more control of the class than I did), I didn’t see him. He was very small in stature; bowed legs, caved in chest, even losing his hair prematurely. I didn’t see any of that. All I saw was a kid in my way of good teaching. I resented him.

One day, he borrowed a pen of mine and then returned it and it reeked of marijuana. I was so upset, and I was going to confront the student the next day. And then, by the grace of God, as Ross walked into the classroom, I saw how brittle his body was. I said nothing to Ross and that afternoon, I called his mother.

“Hi, I’m Ross’s teacher.” She sighed, “What’s he done now.”

“No, I’m calling to apologize. He has been in my class for six months, and I haven’t asked you an essential question. Is your son in pain?”

And with that she began to cry. Me too, and right then and there, together we were “on the way” following Jesus. She couldn’t talk fast enough. Yes, he has a rare disease- Hypophosphatasia, HPP for short… it affects his bones, muscles, joints, teeth, lungs, kidneys, even his brain.”

She talked about his pain, the marijuana, his cutting up in class, her fears, her frustration with school, with her son. I mostly listened, and she knew she had a friend in me. One of the most meaningful conversations I have ever had as a teacher. I changed right there on the spot. Ross was one of my students, and I needed to care for him. (He wasn’t “in my way.”)

When Jesus puts a child in the center of the disciples, he is pointing to a truth. We can only find our power by accepting our powerlessness. We need community to find our way to “the way.”

Henri Nouwen speaks to this truth when he asks us to honestly think about which persons in our lives mean the most to us. Don’t we find that it is those who have chosen to share our pain and touch our wounds with a gentle and tender hand. The friend who can be silent with us in a moment of despair or confusion, who can stay with us in an hour of grief and bereavement, who can tolerate not-knowing, not-curing, not-healing and face with us the reality of powerlessness. The person who makes it clear that whatever happens in the external world, being present to each other is what really matters.

We are invited to find the image of God by walking with Jesus on the way. AMEN.