

Sunday September 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2018  
Pentecost 17

**PRAYER:** We seek to dwell in your presence, O God, and behold evermore the warmth of your love. For you shelter your people during their time of adversity: you cradle them in your arms when they are afraid and lonely. You beckon us to embrace you and put an end to our fearfulness. Entering your sanctuary, we give you praise for your mercy. Be pleased with our worship as we honour your name. Amen.

**STEWARDSHIP:** The Apostle writes in 2 Corinthians 9:6, “He who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and he who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully.” As we offer our gifts as an act of worship, may God grant a bountiful return on our investment in his Kingdom.

**OFFERTORY PRAYER:** Mighty Redeemer, whose judgment is righteousness and whose mercy has no bounds, we bring you our offerings in response to your grace. You sent Christ, who calls us; we give you commitment. You gave your Spirit to mature us; we enthusiastically follow. You provide the commandments as guidance; we seek to obey you. Take us we pray, and use us according to your will. Amen.

**PASTORAL PRAYER:** Gracious God, the source of life and everything that increases its value, we adore you for all you are and all you do, not only for us but for all your children.

While we are grateful for all your gifts, we thank you, in particular, for the concerns that bind all humanity into a common family-the concerns through which you have turned the good earth into a global village and linked us together in a chain that, if broken, could spell ruin for us all. As we ponder these concerns, we are deeply troubled. At times, we second-guess you for saddling us so quickly with so great a responsibility. It is too heavy for us, demanding more strength than we possess and greater wisdom than we command. Yet we do thank you, O Lord. We thank you for having placed in us a trust to match our responsibility; for not abandoning us to our strength and our wisdom; and, for bestowing on our generation, as on no other, the rich legacy of human achievement.

We must confess, O Lord, that we have not done justice by this heritage. Not only have we disgraced some of its noblest values. We have left untouched vast stores of its traditions. Non-Christian religions have been dismissed with the wave of a hand. Economic systems different from our own have been treated with thinly veiled contempt. Customs preceding the industrial revolution have been described as uncivilized and their practitioners described as savages. This catalogue of shame could be greatly extended, but we will not aggravate our guilt by dwelling on it. Not that we seek a verdict of innocence on our past. We pray, rather, for the strength and courage and wisdom not to repeat it.

Open our hearts to the influence of your spirit, O God, that we might open our minds to the influence of other traditions. Help us respect the culture of others-its history, its religion, its education, its economy, its politics, its institutions-as we would have them respect ours; to approach it not with sympathy but with empathy; and not to speak of it without speaking for it.

We pray, O God, for the enlightenment and empowerment of all peoples. We pray for the grace to remove the cloud of self-righteousness with which we have obscured other races and nations. Help us raise their self-esteem by the respect with which we deal with them; to heighten their regard for justice, by the passion with which we contend for their rights; and to intensify their hatred of oppression, by our support of the oppressed. Let us so represent you to one another that you might reveal yourself in all of us.

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Mark 9:30-37  
“Seeking Greatness”

I am coming to terms, I think, with the reality that children, even young children, show more logic and sense than many grownups. Case in point is the little story about a young girl named Micki, whose parents got a disturbing letter from her teacher. The letter said in part, “Micki is an excellent student, but when we have art and colouring projects, she draws everything in dark blue. Sky, grass, flowers, people, houses, kittens, cars, buildings, sun, moon, trees—all dark blue.

This is unusual for a second grader. Can you think of any explanation? If she is having some sort of emotional problem, we need to get to the bottom of it.” That night, the very worried parents sat down with young Micki and asked her why all her pictures were rendered in dark blue. “Why is that a special colour to you? They asked.

“Well”, she began, “I wasn’t going to tell you. But see, about two weeks ago, I lost my box of crayons. The only one left is the dark blue one I found in the front compartment of my book sack...” (The Ultimate Guide to Good Clean Humour, p. 63) Micki’s reasoning was sound, and completely logical. How many times have we read too much into a child’s actions or comments? The reason is we think because of age and experience we know better. But do we?

There is a danger in today’s Gospel lesson, of reading this little incident, and concluding that Jesus was just being quaint and subtle, when he was anything but. This passage marks a very significant moment in the Gospel record. Jesus has just come down from the Mount of Transfiguration and healed a demon possessed boy, stunning everyone, disciples included. Especially, as we learn after, that the disciples could not cast the demon out on their own, and Jesus states that only with prayer can such an exorcism happen.

It was an exciting time, and Jesus’ popularity was growing exponentially. Notice in verse 30 what happens. It reads that Jesus and his disciples went from there, and passed through Galilee, but Jesus did not want the crowds to know about his travel plans. Why? Why the secrecy? Well, it seems, Jesus wanted to take some private time with his disciples; to teach them a critical matter of faith, and what was to come for Jesus personally. Particularly, Jesus talks about his impending betrayal, death, and resurrection.

Mark is quite blunt about the disciple’s reaction. They don’t get it. They do not understand the significance, or necessity, of what Jesus is saying. Furthermore, they are embarrassed, and therefore afraid to ask Jesus about his teaching. I think we can understand their confusion. Consider if you will, the disciples had just seen Jesus do some amazing things, and now he talks about betrayal, death and resurrection.

This particular passage is part of a larger passage (8:22-10:52) in which a threefold pattern emerges three separate times. Jesus predicts his suffering and death (8:31, 9:31, 10:33-34); the disciples don’t understand (8:32-33, 9:32, 10:35-41), and Jesus then gives the disciples further teaching (8:34-9:1; 9:33-50; 10:42-45). Jesus even uses the title “Son of Man” right out of Daniel 7:13, to indicate that he is no ordinary rabbi, but the disciples still don’t get it.

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Amy Oden commenting on this passage, even goes so far as to call the disciples “knuckleheads”. A bit harsh perhaps, but nonetheless accurate. What the disciples are most afraid of is unpacking the very heart of the incarnation. How is it that the “Son of Man” or “Son of God” is to suffer and die? Jesus lays out for them how he significantly differentiates himself from any other prophet or rabbi, before or since.

This question in front of the disciples has been a perplexing one throughout the history of the church. The idea of a suffering Messiah so upset the early Christians, that they came up with alternative theologies, actually what we call heresies, to explain away the suffering of Jesus and his death. Not to explain his death, but to excuse it somehow. There were people who believed in Docetism, which denies outright that Jesus suffered at all.

The Gnostics, who thought they had special knowledge, (the Greek word gnosis means knowledge) believed that only the human part of Jesus suffered, but the divine was left untouched. The Gnostics even wrote their own versions of the Gospel (I.e. the Gospel of Thomas) to strengthen their position. The Gnostic position was made famous recently by author Dan Brown and his book The DaVinci Code.

Gnostics were present so early in the church, that it is clear in a reading of the New Testament, that the Apostle Paul and other authors, namely John, tried to counter these errant thoughts. No wonder that that in 1 Corinthians 1:18 Paul writes, “For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.”

Verses 31 and 32 go right to the heart of who Jesus is, and the very nature of God. Why would God demote himself to the point of death on a cross? So why didn't the disciples just ask Jesus to explain this further. Frankly, they did not want to appear as confused as they were. It might have been embarrassing that those closest to Jesus were just as ignorant of his true nature as the crowds. Perhaps they reasoned that the other disciples must understand, so I will keep my ignorance under wraps.

I understand this approach. No one wants to feel uninformed, confused, or clueless. All of us have had those experiences in a group of acquaintances, who are talking at length about a subject you know absolutely little or nothing about. The feeling of being left out is painful, so to compensate, what do we do? We ask questions, not for knowledge, but to look knowledgeable, or agree with another's opinion when we have no idea if they are correct.

Maybe that is why a certain US President speaks so often before he thinks, or clearly understands. In a church fellowship, our hesitancy to ask questions emerges frequently. We erroneously think that we do not have hard questions, or we believe that everyone else has the answers, and I am somehow left out. So, we suffer in silence. We long to ask things like “Why do good people suffer? Why are people so brutal to each other?”

Why does evil seem to succeed? If God's own Son was betrayed and killed, then who among us is truly safe? Why did God set up the world the way he did? So, we conclude, why ask the hard questions? For the same reason the disciples should have.

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For when we avoid the hard questions in life, the questions we are afraid to ask, we begin to focus on trivial matters like arguing over issues of rank and status. There is a direct line from verse 32 to verse 34.

When the disciples avoid asking the hard questions about Jesus' betrayal, death, and resurrection; they immediately begin to argue over who among them is right, or the best, or the most important. Its incredible! Jesus is talking about how he is working his way down in status in this world, and the disciples are arguing about working their way up. They show their ignorance of who Jesus is, and what he represents, but how often do we do the same thing.

Out of our pain, of not understanding what is going on in our lives, we focus on the wrong things. If I cannot make my relationships function in a healthy way, or I cannot cope with facing my own mortality, or I wonder if there really is a heaven, if I struggle to see value in my work, or if I just want to climb the highest point I can find and scream out "why", then what am I likely to do? I will lash out, and argue over things that are tangible or controllable.

Such as this true story published from August 1999 in Landover, Maryland - 100 years of Christian fellowship, unity, and community outreach ended last Tuesday in an act of congregational discord. Holy Creek Baptist Church was split into multiple factions. The source of dissension (I cannot believe this) is the position of the piano bench which still sits behind the 1923 Steinway piano to the left of the pulpit.

Members and friends at Holy Creek Baptist say that the old bench was always a source of hostility. People should have seen this coming. At present, Holy Creek Congregation will be having four services each Sunday. There has been an agreement mediated by an outside pastor so that each faction will have its own separate service with its own separate pastor.

Since the head pastor is not speaking to the associate pastors, each will have their own service, which will be attended by fractioned members. The services are far enough apart that no group will come into contact with the other. An outside party will be moving the piano bench to different locations and appropriate positions, between services to please all sides, and avoid any further conflict that could result in violence. (Craig Cramblet, Sermon Central).

I wonder how this scripture passage would have been different if the disciples had asked the questions. How in fact, would our lives be different if we, even through anger and tears, asked the hard questions? Questions with no easy, or no answers at all. What would our relationships as a fellowship look like if we encouraged, and lovingly welcomed the hard questions?

In all honesty, we may not come to a satisfying answer, but I am certain there is some real healing in simply getting the tough stuff out there. What if instead of after the service, talking about the weather, or sports; we took the time to really listen to each other's souls. To honestly explore the question, "how are you today?" Have we the courage to answer honestly the hard questions with "I don't know, but I feel your pain, and I want to pray with you"?

Now here is the other thing to consider from this little passage. Notice that in reaction to the disciples' argument about who is the greatest, Jesus called over a little child.

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He did not explode in anger, or argue with them. He simply placed the child on his knee and said, "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomed not me but the one who sent me." We may love this moment, because it reveals Jesus' tenderness, but is there something else going on here. Consider what it means to welcome a child. I mean really welcome a child.

Not just tolerate the child, because he or she's parents brought them along. This is no idle question for God's people, and it is directly tied to asking the hard questions of life. Consider how children are thought of in our society. Yes, we claim to love them, but often children are seen as a burden, or a nuisance. How else do you explain parents leaving toddlers, or even babies in their cars so they can go into the casino, the mall, or the local tavern.

How else do you explain the old adage drilled into me as a kid, that children should be "seen but not heard". How often has a little one come up and tugged on our pant leg or dress, and we have said, "not now". Yes, children are impetuous, lack social graces sometimes, and say ridiculous things sometimes, but Jesus is saying that unless we welcome them, we do not welcome him. Why is that? Well, because we too are impetuous, rude, and say ridiculous things from time to time. We might call it "foot in mouth" disease.

And what, pray tell, is the posture in welcoming a child? Is it not to bend down, or kneel down? To somehow come down to their level. Is it not an act of humility to truly interact with a child? Therefore, we recognize, and approach God in Christ as a child, that is with humility, but also with one other critical factor. With honesty. You and I know that kids are apt to say anything. Case in point. I was privileged to attend, someone's 75<sup>th</sup> birthday recently.

We had just enjoyed a wonderful meal at a local restaurant, and the grandchildren of the birthday celebrant, were enjoying running around the area where we sat, giggling, and interacting with the adults around the table. Suddenly, one of the grandchildren came up to me and bluntly asked the question that was on her mind. Looking me right in the eye she blurted out, "Why are you here?" Before I could answer, her grandparent responded, "Because we felt sorry for him".

The little child Jesus took upon his lap, was not that important in the grand scheme of things in Jesus' society. Remember the mothers of Salem who brought their children to be blessed by Jesus, and the disciples tried to shoo them away? I bet the children that day didn't have a clue why their mothers wanted them to meet Jesus; nor did the little one in today's passage know why Jesus picked him or her up, and placed them on his lap.

So, they too might have asked, "Why am I here?" That can be one of the big questions? Why are we here? A question that can really only be asked out of humility. In the posture of a child, who is tugging on the pant leg, or skirt hem. There is something special about being invited by a child into their world, and into their thinking. To see things as they see them. To take pleasure in the simplest of things. To embrace the privilege of being invited into their imagination.

Such as my own daughter a little girl taking great pleasure in dolling up her dad with necklaces and tiaras, hair clips and scarfs. It was great fun, in fact there is likely a picture of me somewhere in all my finery.

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I can easily picture Jesus enjoying the laughter and play of children. I do not think it's a stretch to think he even joined in their games from time to time. After all they were his children. He knit them together in their mother's wombs according to Psalm 139. And honestly, are we not all his children, and does he not take joy in our laughter, and express compassion and grace into our struggles.

Our destiny in life is not about greatness, nor is it about finding all the answers. It is in fact much simpler than that. The very famous Swiss-German theologian Karl Barth delivered one of the last lectures of his life at the University of Chicago Divinity School. At the end of the lecture, the president of the seminary told the audience that Dr. Barth was not well and very tired, and though Dr. Barth would like to answer questions he thought the strain on him to be too great.

Then he said to Dr. Barth, "Therefore, I'll ask just one question on behalf of all of us." He turned to Barth and asked, "Of all the theological insights you have ever had, which do you consider to be the greatest of all." It was a remarkable question to ask a man who had written tens of thousands of pages of some of the most sophisticated theology ever put on paper. The students sat with pans and pens at the ready.

They did not want to miss this premier insight from one of the greatest theologians to have ever lived. Karl Barth closed his eyes and thought for a moment. Then he smiled, opened his eyes, and said to the young seminarians, "The greatest theological insight I have ever had is this: Jesus loves me, this I know, for the bible tells me so!" (Let me tell you a Story, p. 22-23) Words that even the most childlike among us can fully understand.

**BENEDICTION:** Gracious God, in Jesus Christ you revealed the tyranny of earthly wisdom and the danger of heavenly wisdom. Send us forth, so transformed by our reverence for you, that we shall pursue the wisdom that is from above. Grant us not only the strength to resist the tyranny but the courage to risk the danger. Amen.