

Rev. Timothy M. Crummitt

Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost - Year B

St. Paul's Lutheran Church

Jeremiah 11:18-20

Psalm 54

James 3:13-4:3, 7-8a

Mark 9:30-37

09/23/2018

### **Gospel**

The Holy Gospel according to St. Mark:

30[Jesus and the disciples went on] and passed through Galilee. He did not want anyone to know it;<sup>31</sup>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."

<sup>32</sup>But they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him.

<sup>33</sup>Then they came to Capernaum; and when he was in the house he asked them, "What were you arguing about on the way?" <sup>34</sup>But they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another who was the greatest. <sup>35</sup>He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all." <sup>36</sup>Then he took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms, he said to them, <sup>37</sup>"Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me."

The Gospel of our Lord

### Prayer

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen

### Greatness

Good morning! Have you ever been on a “mission trip?” Congregations do these things all the time, sending groups to other places or countries to do work in the name of the church. In college at Wheeling Jesuit University, a place about 45 minutes southwest of Pittsburgh, PA, they had an annual “mission trip” to the desperately poor counties of lower West Virginia to help provide basic health care. The work that took place all over Houston, TX on the service days during the Youth Gathering this summer could be considered “mission trips.” During the January of my second year of seminary I went on a “mission trip” to Haiti with a handful of other students and a professor, Dr. Daniel Bell Jr. I think I even missed my first anniversary... Megan was very forgiving...

So we flew in to Port-Au-Prince for a 10 day trip in a country that I had heard a lot about on the news, but never expected to actually visit. When I asked Dr. Bell why we were going to Haiti (he had been taking yearly trips to El Salvador for at least a decade) he recounted the story of his trip to El Salvador in 2010. On January 12 news spread of the earthquake that destroyed so much of Haiti and Dr. Bell witnessed the people of El Salvador praying for the Haitians. And to quote Dr. Bell: “When the people of El Salvador start praying for you, you know it’s bad.”

It was a challenge to adjust to what was “normal” for this community, and I’m full of all sorts of stories about the trip from the strange rash that showed up all over most of my body, to the time I almost fell out the back of the taxi-van when the rear hatch broke open and the broken

chair I was sitting on flew back during evening traffic. We helped work on a church connected to a school in a town north of Port-Au-Prince, where I learned that roosters don't crow at the rising of the sun... they seem to do it all night long. But the thing that was most evident in that place, was that God was all around us. That's what I saw, Jesus Christ, evident in the lives of everyone whom we encountered, both good and bad, old and young, Haitian and American.

The traditional way that people think about mission trips is that those going on the trip go and BRING Jesus Christ to that community, as if God needed us to show up and change the world. A couple hundred years of "sending missionaries" to other countries in the name of the church has meant that people eventually started to think that it was only the job of a select few to bring Jesus to far-off and distant places. We forgot two things: that we're all called to walk lives of faith every day, and more importantly, God shows up everywhere, from Haiti to Hampton, our home turf, to work God's will upon the world.

And it was home turf that Jesus found himself on in today's Gospel reading. Jesus and the disciples come to Galilee, the region that they would call home. One interesting detail is that they stay in a house, possibly even Jesus' very own. If not his, then one of the first called, maybe Simon Peter's. While there, Jesus devotes his time to teaching the disciples privately, a chance for them to listen before the journey towards Jerusalem, and the cross. Unfortunately, the disciples haven't been paying attention to his words. Instead they've been arguing over which one of them was the greatest. They at least feel embarrassed when Jesus asks them what they were talking about, and so they choose to be quiet. *"Their misunderstanding is not simply*

*intellectual; it is existential. Their following of Jesus is outwardly only.*"<sup>1</sup> one commentator writes.

So Jesus decides to teach them. He takes a child 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."*<sup>2</sup> In order to understand this detail we have to forget how we look at children today. PHEME PERKINS writes that: *"The shocking element in this episode cannot be appreciated by modern readers. Our social conventions have exalted childhood as a privileged time of innocence, and this romantic view is usually imported into this passage. However, the child in antiquity was a non-person. Children should have been with the women, not hanging around the teacher and his students."*<sup>3</sup> Another commentator goes into further detail: *"In first-century Palestinian society a child would symbolize not so much innocence or unspoiledness as lack of social status and legal rights. A child was a 'non-person' totally dependent on others for nurture and protection, and of course one could not expect to gain anything either socially or materially from kindness to a child... by embracing the child Jesus displays his acceptance of the child (who is a social nonentity) as worthy of respect and care."*<sup>4</sup>

In fact, they believe that this passage might be the reason why we view children differently now. We tend to look at this passage and assume that we need to adopt a sort of

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<sup>1</sup>Williamson, Lamar. *Mark*. Louisville, Ky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009. p. 169

<sup>2</sup> Mark 9:35b NRSV

<sup>3</sup>Keck, Leander E. *The New Interpreter's Bible Commentary Vol. VII*. Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 2015. p. 482

<sup>4</sup>Donahue, John R., and Daniel J. Harrington. *The Gospel of Mark*. Collegeville, Minn: Liturgical Press, 2002. p. 282

innocence, but instead Jesus is telling us that true greatness can be found when we welcome the person or persons who the world has dictated as unworthy of notice. It is within those people that we welcome Jesus. We see the eyes of Christ in the people we so often ignore or even despise. Have you ever watched the crowd when you're near a person who is homeless? This weird thing happens where EVERYONE lowers their eyes. People who are homeless very rarely share eye contact with someone. The crowd looks down, either out of shame or embarrassment, unwilling to recognize the person as a human being.

What would it look like if we welcomed everyone with the type of love that Jesus commands in the Gospel today? In his book "The Humanity of God" the great 20th century theologian Karl Barth writes that this is "the basis of Christian ethics '*To think of every human being, even the oddest, most villainous or miserable as one to whom Jesus Christ is Brother and God is Father, and we have to deal with them on this assumption.*'"<sup>5</sup> That is the challenge for us today. From the homeless person we ignore outside the store to the convicted murderer on death row, Jesus calls on us to see Christ in each and every single person. The person sitting next to you, the coworker you despise, the politician that absolutely drives you crazy, all of them!

It is here that we find our mission, you don't need to go to Haiti to work on this command. When we hear this text we often think in terms of downgrading our opinion of ourselves. We think that we need to squash down our own ego, adopting the attitude of the lowliest of low in order to serve God. Instead, the text is trying to elevate our perception of ALL

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<sup>5</sup>Keck, Leander E. *The New Interpreter's Bible Commentary Vol. VII*. Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 2015. p. 482

people. The very idea that we need to “lower” the way we look at ourselves betrays the fact that we still see people on a scale of worthiness that ignores everyone “below” a certain point.

We are all called to the mission field, for the harvest is plentiful. True greatness can be found in the value we place on those society has decided to hate or ignore. It is to this that we have all been called, so let us respond in love. Amen.