

Rev. Timothy M. Crummitt

Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost - Year B

81st Sunday of Pandemic - Masked Service

Jeremiah 11:18-20

Psalms 54

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

Mark 9:30-37

09/19/2021

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;31for 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.” 32But they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him. 33Then they came to Capernaum; and when he was in the house he asked them, “What were you arguing about on the way?” 34But they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another who was the greatest. 35He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, “Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.” 36Then he took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms, he said to them, 37“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.

True Greatness

Good morning! I've had Lord of the Rings on my mind a good bit lately. This might have something to do with all the time I have spent watching the extended movies and all the extra bonus features. The extended editions alone run for a total of 11 1/2 hours, and then you need to add the roughly 5-10 hours of bonus content for each movie. Most normal people find it tedious and boring, but as we all have learned by now, I'm not like most people, and so watching all the extra little goodies is something I've done every couple years since they came out. I read the book (and Tolkien always intended for it to be only one book) for the first time in the seventh or eighth grade, and having finished all the movies' features, I'm re-reading the book too.

When I was younger, and especially when the movies came out, my favorite characters were the great warriors like Aragorn, Legolas, and Gimli. The epic night battle of Helm's Deep was etched into my mind as soon as I first read the words. But this time around, I can't help but notice the strange and wonderful power and resilience of the hobbits. As Gandalf says in *The Fellowship of the Ring*, "You can learn everything you need to know about them in a month, and even after 100 years, they will still surprise you." It's easy to get caught up in the characters of the strong warriors, powerful wizards, and ancient elves. But in the small hobbits we find an important lesson: what we see as weakness, is actually full of strength. Confronted with the power of the one ring Boromir is driven to betray Frodo, Gandalf is so afraid of the ring that he won't even touch it. Galadriel gives us a vision of what taking the ring would mean. Yet, throughout it all, Frodo carries that great weight alone. There, in those three foot tall little

folk we see true greatness. It's a lesson the disciples could learn a thing or two from.

Today we find ourselves hearing the second of three passion predictions in the Gospel of Mark. Last week we heard the first, and today we have the second and shortest of the three. An interesting point is that given the simplicity of today's prediction, scholars believe this is possibly the oldest and most accurate of what Jesus likely spoke. And as Lamar Williamson Jr. writes, we find ourselves asking one very important question with today's reading: *"What does it mean to follow Jesus? This elemental question, first introduced after Peter's confession at Caesarea Philippi, is taken up again in a second passion prediction... Once again, the teaching of Jesus, in act as well as word, challenges a fundamental human assumption and cuts across several common patterns of human behavior."*¹ If you needed the two sentence summary, there it is.

But that question needs to remain something that, as Christians, we need to consistently revisit. After telling his disciples that he is going to die, the disciples completely miss and/or ignore his message, instead using their time to argue with each other about which one of them is the greatest. Jesus, probably realizing that he has some work to do, sets up camp in Capernaum to do some teaching away from the crowds with the just the disciples.

The lesson begins with Jesus putting a small child in front of the group of grown men. *"Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all."* 36 *Then he took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms, he said to them, 37 'Whoever welcomes one such child*

¹ Williamson, Lamar Jr. *Mark: Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*. Louisville: Presbyterian Publishing Corporation, 2009. p. 167.

in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.” Now, it’s here that we in the 21st century make a rather large mistake. We equate children with innocence, but this was NOT the point that Jesus is making. Children were seen much differently in the first century. One scholar writes that *“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 materialistically 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.”*²

Pheme Perkins drives the same point home too. *“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 these passages. However, the child in antiquity was a non-person.”*³ This is how little children meant to the first century, Perkins continues, saying, *“Roman authors convey little information about children prior to adolescence, when they entered into adulthood. There appears to have been little interest in children as such, even among medical writers. Childless Romans who needed heirs commonly adopted adults rather than children.”*⁴

WOW! No matter how many times I read about this section of scripture, I never stop being surprised. So for us to understand the point

² Donahue, John R., and Daniel J. Harrington. *The Gospel of Mark*. Collegeville, Minn: Liturgical Press, 2002. p. 285.

³ Keck, Leander E. *The New Interpreter's Bible Commentary*. Volume 7. Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 2015. p. 482.

⁴ Ibid.

Jesus is trying to make, we need to put aside how we see children and take on a first century perspective. Another thing we need to give special attention is the comparison of the child with an ambassador. In the first century when a ruler or community would send out an emissary, the receiving community or leader would be expected to treat that person with all the respect and dignity that would be bestowed upon the person or place that had sent them.⁵ So when Jesus stands a child in the midst of the disciples he is answering their question. “Who is the greatest? This child is the greatest, and they should be treated in the same way that you treat me.”

Karl Barth, one of the 20th century's greatest theologians, argued that we are called to treat every human being, “*even the oddest, most villainous or miserable*”⁶ as one who is endowed with dignity and deserving of respect and honor. It makes me think of Dolores. For a great many years Dolores was the organist at First English Lutheran Church where I grew up. After she retired, she would routinely show me what it meant to treat everyone with dignity. Whenever someone who was homeless or down on their luck showed up for worship, usually coming in “late” sometime after the gathering hymn, they would often be met by strange looks by the worshipping “regulars” like myself. Except for Dolores. Without missing a beat, wherever they happened to be in the sanctuary space, she would casually walk over and give them her bulletin so they could follow along with the rest of us. She would point out where we were in the service, and explain any of the intricacies of our particular worship patterns. Then she

⁵ Donahue, John R., and Daniel J. Harrington. *The Gospel of Mark*. Collegeville, Minn: Liturgical Press, 2002. p. 285.

⁶ Keck, Leander E. *The New Interpreter's Bible Commentary*. Volume 7. Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 2015. p. 482.

would go back to the narthex and get another bulletin for herself and go back to her seat.

So... returning to our earlier question--what does it mean to follow Jesus? Well it means acting like Dolores, showing each and every person we meet the respect, dignity, and love that God shows to every one of us. It means casting aside the very easy temptation that the disciples fall prey to. It means remembering that when God became flesh, God chose to go to the cross rather than break with those principles. It means realizing that we can't take the easy road or simple answer. God calls us down a different path, one where we can experience the full breadth of beauty that can be found in every. single. person. Amen.