

Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 20) – Year B – September 20, 2009

Proverbs 31:10-31; Psalm 1; James 3:13-4:3,7-8a; Mark 9:30-37

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Do we have any Beatles fans here today? Whether you love them or hate them, the words to many of the Beatles' songs are haunting. Here are the opening lines of one of my favorites, "There are places I remember all my life, though some have changed. Some forever, not for better, some have gone, and some remain. All these places have their moments, with lovers and friends I still can recall. Some are dead, and some are living. In my life, I've loved them all." Experience tells us that there are often places in our lives to which we return again and again. I don't just mean geographic locations, although that is true too. But also memories, recurring dreams, certain people, and those other emotional peaks and valleys within us that call us back repeatedly, like a dog working out the tender marrow from a juicy bone.

The Gospel of Mark is tightly consistent in unfolding the message of God's grace in Jesus Christ our Lord. In the opening verses of Mark, Jesus comes from Nazareth in Galilee to be baptized by John in the river Jordan. After John is arrested, Jesus returns to Galilee proclaiming the good news. As His healing and teaching mission progresses, Jesus' fame spreads from Galilee to the surrounding country. In today's reading, Jesus and the disciples are passing through Galilee, on their way to Jerusalem. Just before Jesus is crucified, He tells Peter that He will go before them to Galilee. At the resurrection, Jesus appears to Mary Magdalene and two other women and reminds them to tell all the disciples that He is going on ahead to Galilee, where they too will see Him. Mark takes great care to connect Jesus to Galilee, and today's lesson gives us a clearer picture of why that might be.

Galilee. Not quite front and center in the spheres of power or influence that radiate from Jerusalem. Provincial and marginal, marked by mostly working class folks with a noticeable accent. Do you remember the old Hertz car rental adverts? They capture the essence of what Mark is telling us about Galilee. A poor weary traveler stuck in a long line waiting for his rental car versus the speedy Hertz Club 1 check-in process. The tag line is "Hertz? Not exactly." So here is Mark saying, "Jerusalem? Not exactly!" According to author and priest, Fr. Elizondo, "From the time of Solomon the land of Galilee had come to be known as the land of Cabul, which in itself meant 'like nothing'. The connotation remained and the inhabitants of the region came to be looked down on." Isn't it interesting that one of the first questions most of us ask a stranger is the deceptively casual, "Where are you from?" It is both a gentle means of gleaning a little information and getting to know someone, but it is also a way that almost all of us use to situate the other into a cultural frame of reference. Whether we're aware of it or not, you and I judge others on many levels, including how we decide whether someone is 'in' or 'out', a success or a failure.

Growing up in Galilee Jesus was close enough to the larger city of Capernaum to have encountered a diverse array of travelers from a variety of cultures, but He was still a long way from the legalistic God of the Pharisees and Scribes, and other leaders of the Temple in Jerusalem. Jesus knew all too well what it meant to be judged and categorized. He knew how it felt to be rejected and marginalized. Yet He constantly works against society's norms and values in this respect. The picture of Jesus' disciples in Mark is usually more like the opposite of what Jesus is teaching. They are in many ways, just like you and me. None of us grew up in perfect isolation from the world. And none of us have passed through that great classroom of life without being stained by the brush of societal values. In fact, probably one of the biggest challenges of our new lives in Christ is to sift what we have already learned, and flip many of our values upside down in the way that Jesus teaches us. The disciples are fully imbued with worldly thinking and doing, including the ubiquitous and virulent struggle for power and prestige. Put more than two people together, and we find the unwritten rule immediately in action to determine where we fit in the group: leader, follower, parent figure, joker, team player, and so on. Jesus catches out the disciples as they argue about their own roles in Jesus' inner circle of followers. When questioned, the disciples rightly get all sheepish and embarrassed. Jesus just uses the moment to teach them an important

lesson about God's idea of servant leadership. "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all," Jesus tells us.

Do you remember the TV footage of the Beatles arriving in America for the first time? Young girls screaming hysterically, the crowd roaring and pushing forward like an untamed beast as police officers, and security guards try to hold them back. Who can argue that the Beatles radically changed the world of popular music? In the field of medicine, there have been many incredible advances, but the discovery of penicillin is still high on the list of breakthroughs. In your life and mine, we have each had unique experiences that have powerfully penetrated the usual, irrevocably changing us in some way. We may revisit some of these memories for many reasons: for comfort or healing, for a sense of God's peace, for love. What has become so familiar to us from this reading – that is Jesus taking a little child and putting him or her amongst the disciples – was, to the disciples, quite scandalous behavior. Remember, this is the same group who tried to stop the children from bothering Jesus. Jesus' action would prove to be just as important in transforming this rag tag bunch of followers into true disciples of Christ as any earth-shattering event we have been through or witnessed for ourselves. Jesus shows us all that the most vulnerable, the very least, the invisible, the one with no honor or status in whatever age we live in is the one we must seek out and embrace as if we were welcoming Jesus Himself. This is how you and I make space for God's grace. This is how we seek and serve all our neighbors as ourselves, and in doing so, it is how we reveal the love of Jesus, and how we honor God.

The word used to describe the little child that Jesus brings into the circle of His love is the same word for child used in the Septuagint translation of the servant song of Isaiah chapter 53 (verse 2). As Christians, we know that Jesus' faithful service to the world was scorned and rejected by the powers that be. Jesus' revelation of God's love, power and leadership was so unexpected in the world's scheme of things that He had to teach His disciples several times throughout their journey together about how the world would reject Him, and how God would vindicate His sacrifice through our Lord's glorious resurrection. Predictably, the disciples didn't understand. But we cannot be too harsh in our own judgment. How many of us understood something like calculus the first time a teacher tried to explain it to us? Well, not me, anyway! After developing the theory of relativity, Einstein once quipped that there were probably less than ten people in the whole world who truly understood its implications. Before cell phones, heart transplants, space travel, and microchips became ordinary, who knew such things were even possible? The prophets spoke of the Messiah as the suffering servant, but most of the Judean leaders firmly believed in a very different idea of what and who the Messiah would be. Their idea did not come close to the reality of Jesus Christ, a humble servant of all, who spent time with the despised and marginalized of society, and died an ignominious death on a cross.

What the first disciples were faced with was a mind-blowing challenge to everything they thought they knew about whom and what was important. Where we are born, or grow up, is largely circumstantial. However, what we do with our lives, the gift God has given us, is a whole different question. For Peter and the others listening and learning God's way was the beginning of a new way of being truly human, and a bright light of revelation that would re-write the values that they held most sacred. In so many ways, we have all traveled so far, and yet we find ourselves revisiting Galilee, and learning again, what it means to serve the Lord. For those we try not to see, and who try not to be seen; for the lonely and most vulnerable amongst us; for the poor and abused; for all who bear the image of God, may the Lord give us the grace to say that in our lives, we too have loved them all, according to God's will.

Amen.