

Pentecost 18 — Proper 20 Year B

Vulnerable

Mark's Gospel was the first written. It is the shortest. Most likely, it was a one-person play, something that was first memorized and shared through oral tradition. Only in time did it go from one-person dramatic storytelling to gospel text, written down, copied, and eventually read throughout the Church and the world. Mark's Greek is quick and to the point, not as elegant or poetic as Luke. Jesus and his disciples are always on the move, with Mark constantly saying "και μετα" (and then). Mark and the storytellers who gave us his words have a sense of urgency about the whole of Jesus' life and teaching.

This quick, urgent storytelling also yields excerpts of stories that are very direct and to the point. With such directness and pointedness, the Church in the 21st century can be left asking, "So what?" or "What else is there to take from this?" This is particularly tempting or easy to do if the story is one of familiarity — the likelihood of which increases if a version of the passage is contained in Matthew, Mark, and Luke, like today's excerpt is.

Jesus is walking through Galilee with his disciples. He's gathered those closest to him to teach them (not a crowd, but just them), and he tells them for a second time what's to come: that he will die and be raised again. Last week the Church heard Jesus about his death and resurrection for the first time in Mark 8:31. In the space between last week's text and this week's text, Jesus goes up on a mountain to pray and Peter, James, and John see him transfigured with Moses and Elijah there to offer their approval. (Mark 9:2-9)

On the way down the mountain, Jesus tells those three not to say anything because it's not time yet. This week he and the disciples are on the move so that others don't hear the teaching, "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." (Mark 9:31) Despite Jesus doing a really good job of using his words, saying almost the exact same thing for a second time, having a transformation experience, and just healing a demoniac, the disciples don't understand.

That's how revolutionary the Resurrection is. Jesus says exactly what he means, and yet the disciples don't understand. As Christians who find our hope of all things being made right at the end of time in the Resurrection — that death itself has been defeated — we know that Jesus means exactly what he says. The disciples, so used to seeing one self-appointed messiah after another come and go while their occupation under the Romans remains, can't fathom that Jesus actually means that he will die and that he will be raised up. That's not what they're looking for! Their imaginations are limited to hoping for a king to lead an army against Caesar, not a man to open his arms on the hard wood of the cross that everyone might come within the reach of his saving embrace.

This lack of imagination about how the world might be, a world where death isn't the end, is what fuels the next part of the story from Mark. Jesus and the disciples reach Capernaum and he asks them what they were arguing about. Do you remember being a child and having some argument with your siblings that you were sure your parents didn't know about? Maybe it was mostly in facial expressions or hushed tones. You may have known it would be something your parents didn't want you fighting about — or thought wasn't even worth fighting about — so you kept it a secret. Then they asked you at the end of the car ride or at dinner, "What was that commotion about?"

That's the disciples with Jesus when they reach Capernaum. He asks what they've been arguing about among themselves and they don't answer him. They probably felt sheepish and might have

looked at their feet or food or off into the distance (still inside the house), pretending not to hear him. Again, he sits the twelve down. This is not a crowd or a medium-sized group. This is the twelve, the twelve who have committed to following him — literally following him around the countryside — to whom he is giving the next two teachings.

“Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.” The disciples — unable to imagine a world where death has been defeated, empires overthrown, and all of creation restored to right relationship — are fighting over who will be first, and Jesus tells them who will be first: the person who doesn’t want to be, the person looked at as not having ambition, the person who shows vulnerability and servanthood rather than seeking their own glory.

Then he takes a child, puts that child in the midst of them, 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.” Children weren’t welcomed in the first century. They were tolerated. They played like all kids do, but children were an economic asset, able and expected to work. They were property until they were either old enough to own property themselves — boys — or sold in marriage to another male — girls. They couldn’t speak for themselves and had no power.

Yet, a child — powerless against the world around her, vulnerable to the powers that existed, and unable to defend herself — is who Jesus tells the disciples to welcome: the powerless, the vulnerable, the ones whose voices are ignored in the world. Jesus says that by welcoming people like that, the ones who can’t influence society and don’t strive to be in charge, they welcome Jesus. Not only do they welcome him, they welcome God who sent him. Welcoming the powerless is a far cry from arguing over who is the greatest!

That’s how these two excerpts of Mark fit together though, the snippet about walking through Galilee and the snippet about being in Capernaum in a house together. When they get to the destination, when the Church continues to come together to a place for understanding, Jesus helps them to see a little more of what he is about and what he’s not about. He’s not about being the greatest. He’s about being a servant of all. He’s not about winning friends and influencing people. He’s about welcoming the vulnerable to be among him and his followers.

Jesus tells his disciples that when they welcome the vulnerable, they welcome him. They’re looking for a leader on a war horse to overthrow the empire. They’re not looking for a vulnerable child. They haven’t been looking for that since he was born, fully God and fully human, as a child himself. Yet Jesus tells him that in welcoming the vulnerable, they welcome him. Jesus tells the Church that in being vulnerable, we are like him.

Being vulnerable, being a servant, being like a child, is what Jesus tells his disciples he’s come to do when he predicts his death and resurrection for a second time. He’s not coming to take over the empire. He’s come to do more than that, something so revolutionary the disciples can’t imagine it: defeat death itself. Death isn’t defeated with a sword, and his revolution is not with generals and battles. Death is defeated with a cross, with Jesus’ cross. And it was defeated in his rising again — just like he told the disciples it would be, even if they didn’t understand him.

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