

## Pentecost 17B, Proper 20. Mark 9:30-37. September 20, 2015

It must have been a pretty strange trip. I imagine it as a road trip—Jesus and the disciples are walking from somewhere back to home base in Galilee. And you know how road trip conversations go. Someone desperately wants to pass the time, but not too seriously—perhaps the game of counting out of state license plates would do. Someone else wants to travel quietly, thinking their own thoughts or just zoning out and thinking about nothing. Other folks want to read, to draw up a precise itinerary, to sing Bohemian Rhapsody over and over again. Or, horror of horrors, to watch and sing along to Disney’s Frozen on repeat. Jesus is the guy who decides that a road trip is the perfect time to really cover some heavy topics: look folks, now that we’re alone, let me tell you again about how I’m going to die.

And not just how I will die, but what it is that I’ve really gotten you into. You agreed to follow me on The Way—and The Way goes through betrayal and death on its way to resurrection. It’s heavy stuff: being a disciple of Jesus means living in the hope of the resurrection, but following him also means the possibility that the state may execute you.

There are many ways that this road trip this road trip conversation could have gone badly: maybe Andrew is hangry, Peter needs to stop to use the bathroom even though they stopped for Philip twenty minutes ago, John is pouting about losing the license plate game. And Judas—I assure you, Judas was singing “Let It Go” from Frozen even while Jesus tried to teach.

But what actually happened is just as normal and human as all these possibilities. This isn’t the first time that Jesus has dropped hints about how things will go down in Jerusalem. Mark says they didn’t understand, but I don’t think it was as if Jesus were talking gibberish. They understood just enough to be afraid. They are so afraid that they are unable to ask him about it. They have entrusted their very lives to this man, and they are too frightened to ask him about this obviously important thing he *just* said.

So what happens instead? They drop back a little bit and begin to argue amongst themselves about who was the greatest. Now obviously it’s embarrassing when Jesus calls them on it. And we’ve all been there—we get called on in class or in a meeting just when we were flirting with a colleague or arguing about fantasy football, or watching a cat video on our phone. And it seems like a really weird time for them to start this argument. Jesus starts talking about death, and that reminds them: oh yeah, that’s right, I’m the greatest among us.

But I think that it makes perfect sense, because they are afraid. Fear leads directly to self-aggrandizement. It causes us to cling more tightly to what’s ours—to our “rights” and privileges. We become afraid, we grasp the things we have, we assert that we are entitled to them . . . and it’s only a short step from there to claiming that *our* rights are bigger than *their* rights. And from there, it’s easy enough to go one step beyond the disciples and to lash out at anyone who, in our fear, we think might jeopardize our status as the greatest.

This is how fear operates. This is how *we* operate, when we are afraid. This is why so many times in the Bible, when God or an angel shows up, the first thing they say is “Fear not.” Because it is fear, not doubt, that is the opposite of faith. I think Jesus teaches us this pretty clearly in today’s passage. The disciples are afraid, and therefore

seek to puff themselves up, to promote their own status and honor. And Jesus' correction is to tell them that they are called to be the servants of all.

The child he grabs from somewhere to use as a sermon illustration didn't mean, to his first hearers, innocence and cuteness and all things sweet and beautiful in the world. The child at that time meant someone with no status, with no place in the hierarchy of power and honor. This is a direct illustration of how to be last of all. You welcome and serve the one who can give you nothing, who cannot enrich your status, who cannot pay you back for your kindness. Fear makes us anxious to be the greatest; faith makes us passionate about serving people and serving in situations where we have nothing worldly to gain.

It's not crazy to be afraid. There's lots of scary stuff out there. There's lots of scary stuff in here, too. It isn't crazy to be afraid, but we are called to make our decisions based on our faith, rather than our fear. We are called to catch ourselves when we start clinging to our stuff and ask, "What is it that I'm afraid of right now? And how can I respond with the faith that welcomes and serves, rather than the fear that guards and excludes?" It may be welcoming a child, a stranger, an enemy, change, or the future. Because the life of faith in God, revealed in Jesus, calls us to be last, if this faith is central to our lives then we really have very little to fear.

It's good to ask what each of us, as individuals, fear and how we can respond instead with faith. But it may be more important to ask about our corporate fears and faith as a community gathered around God's table. What is it that we fear in this transition of ordained leadership? What is it that we fear as the public voice of Christianity seems to reach fewer ears in our culture? Or, if you're a church nerd, as the Anglican Communion unravels? What if all our fears come true?

Could that at any point stop us from our calling of welcoming and serving those with the least status and power? It can't. It can't. And as long as we live that calling, we are guaranteed to be meeting Christ and meeting God with every welcome and every act of service. Fear not! And let us live the life of faith that gives us always the opportunity to welcome God in our midst. Amen.