

Seventeenth Weekend After Pentecost (RCL/B): “Lord, Show Me When to Speak Up and When to Shut Up”

James 3:13-4:3, 7-8a; Mark 9:30-37

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Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Manasquan, NJ

The last couple of weeks we’ve been talking about God’s call for us to think before we speak, to measure our words carefully, to use words to heal and not wound, to build up, not tear down. God gave us two ears, one mouth: reminding us to listen at least twice as much as we speak. Interestingly, the theme of our women’s retreat, coming up next month, is: “*Be still and know that I am God*” (Psalm 46:10). The beautiful sounds of silence....

But ironically in today’s Gospel the silences are fueled by fear and shame, not wisdom or virtue. If this were an episode in the Gospel-based video series *The Chosen*, there wouldn’t have to be a lot of extras hired to create a crowd. In the first part of this scene there are just Jesus and His disciples. He’s teaching them a hard lesson and He wants their full attention, no distractions. In one sentence, Jesus makes what may be the earliest of all predictions about His passion, death and resurrection:

“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 9:31b)

The disciples didn’t know what their rabbi was talking about. Here they were on what sometimes seemed like a victory tour: continually on the road, thronged by people wherever they went, sought out by a flood of humanity bringing the sick and demon-possessed to be healed, clamoring to hear the renowned preacher Jesus. The disciples must have felt like minor celebrities themselves, serving as roadies and sometimes the warm-up act for the celebrity from Nazareth. So how did betrayal, death and “rising again” (?) fit into that otherwise positive, even appealing picture?

*They didn't know what he was talking about, but were afraid to ask him....
(Mark 9:32, The Message)*

We've been there, right? We don't know what someone is talking about – the teacher, the prof, the boss, the pastor, the workshop leader, the doctor, or maybe our spouse – but we don't say anything, we don't ask for clarification, we don't admit we're not tracking what they're saying, because we don't want to sound dumb, we don't want the other person to think we're "less than," or maybe we're afraid they'll be **angry** if we 'fess up to not understanding. Like we're questioning their teaching ability or they'll think we weren't paying attention when we really were!

So basically there are times when we blurt out things we shouldn't, and there are other times when we should be saying something (like "I don't understand") and we don't. There's a second time in today's Gospel when the disciples are stone cold silent.

³³ [Jesus and the disciples] came to Capernaum. When [Jesus] was safe at home, he asked them, "What were you discussing on the road?"

³⁴ The silence was deafening—they had been arguing with one another over who among them was greatest.

Uh oh. On the heels of Jesus predicting suffering and death on His horizon, His friends are strutting around like peacocks, making a case for why one is better, smarter, holier, more talented, closer to Jesus than another. They deserve an "F" for the lesson in discipleship Jesus has been trying to teach them! What did we hear last week?

"If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me." (Mark 8:34b, NRSV)

Taking up one's cross is a pretty far cry from "I want the corner office."

To His credit, Jesus doesn't angrily ask them, "Why do I bother?" (which He actually does elsewhere!). He's very calm. He carefully weighs His words.

35 He sat down and summoned the Twelve. "So you want first place? Then take the last place. Be the servant of all."

36-37 He put a child in the middle of the room. Then, cradling the little one in his arms, he said, "Whoever embraces one of these children as I do embraces me, and far more than me—God who sent me." (Mark 9, NRSV)

People who study the Bible for a living tell us that Jesus chooses a child for His object lesson because a child young enough to be cradled in His arms is basically helpless. Little children cannot fend for themselves. They are dependent on others to care for them. So Jesus is teaching us that **the ones who are greatest in His eyes are the ones who care for the least**. The ones worthy of **prestige** in His eyes aren't those with power but those who keep company with the powerless. **Success** for His followers will be directly related to service. If you want to be "big" in God's eyes, look out for the "little" ones.

Jesus uses the welcoming of a child as a sign of compassion and concern for the last, the lost and the least, and also of "hospitality to the unimportant."¹ Recently we heard in the letter of James that we should be sure to give the same warm welcome to worship to a person dressed shabbily as to someone well-dressed. The highlighting of "hospitality to the unimportant" reminds us that **we are here for those who are not here yet**. The reality is that many of those who are not here yet have been turned off to Church (with a big C) because they've been treated as unimportant or less than or unworthy of acceptance, or unfit for admittance, as if the Church were a country club for saints rather than a hospital for sinners. Hopefully, Lord-willing, these children of God, these brothers and sisters weren't given the cold shoulder or shown the door **here at Holy Trinity** -- but if people have a bad experience in one church (small c) they do tend to paint the whole institution with the same brush. All the more reason for us to put out the welcome mat and embrace those who come for spiritual food and drink, for Christian community, whomever they are.

We started by pointing out how the disciples were silent when they should have spoken up. First they were silent out of fear they'd look stupid for not understanding, then they were silent out of shame they'd been beating their chests and vying to be top dog. What can we say? They were as human as we are. What great reminders Scripture has given us these past few weeks of how much we need God's grace, the Holy Spirit's understanding in our heads, light in our eyes, love in our hearts, holy hand on our shoulder, to figure out when to keep our mouths shut and when to speak up or speak out. "Hospitality to the unimportant" includes genuinely welcoming people once they arrive at our door, but it also means speaking up to **make the world more hospitable** to those who are most vulnerable, most powerless: the voiceless, the homeless, the hopeless, the poor, who depend on us to share our material blessings **and** to use our voice to serve their causes and to alleviate their suffering, as Christ our Lord, cradling a child in His arms, calls us to do. Amen

¹Donald Juel, *Mark* (Augsburg Commentary on the New Testament, Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1990), p. 134.

Pastor Mary Virginia Farnham

