

September 16, 2018 • 17th Sunday in Kingdomtide

“Fear and Greatness”

Sermon by Tricia Guerrero



Mark 9:30-37

They went on from there and passed through Galilee. He did not want anyone to know it; for 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.” But they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him.

Then they came to Capernaum; and when he was in the house he asked them, “What were you arguing about on the way?” But they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another who was the greatest. He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, “Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.” Then he took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms, he said to them, “Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.”

My sister and I are less than two years apart and as kids, we often fought over who was the best - at sports, school, art or pretty much anything! But our most intense battle was about who would get to push my great-grandmother’s wheelchair into church each Sunday morning. Partly, we loved our Nanny and we wanted to help her. But on the flip side, we fought over who would get this honor because it came with attention. Everyone you passed at church would give compliments, noticing you were helping, and you would be recognized as a wonderful great-granddaughter. We both wanted to be seen as “the greatest” in Nanny’s and our church’s eyes and we would fight one another to get to that place of honor.

Don’t we all get lost in that fight as well? It’s a very human thing to want to be noticed, affirmed, to be successful. The disciples, too, seem to get lost in their desire for recognition and securing their place of greatness.

Our scripture begins with Jesus and his disciples traveling through Galilee. Jesus shares the important news that he will be betrayed and killed, and the disciples are afraid. Well of course, their teacher and friend has just shared that violence and danger lie ahead. That’s incredibly troubling and scary news.

In Mark, Jesus makes this prediction of his betrayal and death three different times, this is the second of the three, and each time, the disciples ignore it.

The first time Jesus predicts his death in chapter 8, Peter rebukes him and then Jesus teaches them that in order to follow him, they must deny themselves, take up their cross and follow him. Today’s scripture brings us to Jesus’ second prediction of his betrayal and death. The disciples are afraid and then Jesus teaches them that to be first you must be last and that those who welcome children, welcome him. In Jesus’ last prediction of his death in chapter 10, James and John ask him for prestige, to sit next to Jesus in his glory and in response, Jesus teaches them that they must become servants, people who serve others.

Each time Jesus predicts his betrayal and death, the disciples fail to respond appropriately, they seem to miss the big, important news that Jesus is sharing with them. Why don’t the disciples say “what do you mean, you’re going to be betrayed and killed?” “Jesus, this is a big deal, tell us more.”

To help us understand their confusion, we remember that Israel’s expectation of a Messiah is one that would bring about military victory over and against Israel’s enemies, especially the harsh and dominating Roman Empire. This victory would restore the kingdom of Israel, it would bring about God’s peaceable kingdom. And the disciples have placed their hope in Jesus as Messiah. But all of this expectation is being turned upside down with these announcements from Jesus that he will be betrayed and killed, the ultimate defeat in their eyes.

It seems they are afraid to ask Jesus the big, hard questions about what he is predicting. Instead, along the way to Capernaum, the disciples argue about who was the greatest among them. We see what happens to the disciples when they sidestep the real questions they are afraid to ask -- they turn to arguing with each other, squabbling among themselves over petty issues of rank and status. The fear turns into this competition to be the greatest.

But Jesus responds by sitting down, calling the disciples over and teaching them what it means to be first - or greatest. In this moment, Jesus flips everything they think they know.

In the first century Jewish world, all that surrounds these disciples would have taught a top down worldview - that those on top have power over those on the bottom. Ultimately, the purpose in life is to get ahead - to gain power and prestige - and this is what leads to security.

In business, politics and even our personal lives, we see with this lens as well. We compete to be the best: to get into the best school, to be the best athlete or performer... just look at the popularity of tv shows like Dancing with the Stars or Chopped. As teens, it's about top SAT scores and getting enough likes on an instagram post - or as an adult, to ensure a prestigious job and work your way up the ladder. We all feel pressure to compete - to be seen, noticed, successful.

Competition can also be fun. It can challenge us to be self-disciplined and better. I mean, who doesn't love the Olympics or a show like America's Got Talent(!) or our annual youth's Mission Impossible scavenger hunt. Competition can help us to grow and see the best in ourselves and others.

From a young age, we all have a need to be seen and recognized and as we grow up, the world tells us that to be seen, we must be successful, accomplished, make it to the top. The unintended outcome is that our worth becomes tied to success and the fear of failure lodges itself deep inside of us.

In their fear, the disciples reveal their world view of competition, getting ahead and being on top. But Jesus challenges this worldview and assumptions about how the world is arranged. He addresses their hard questions by helping reframe what it means to be a disciple, what it means to serve and participate in God's kingdom.

On our youth service trips every summer, our youth have the opportunity to step outside of their "regular life" and do something different. They step away from their focus and responsibilities at school, in sports and music, away from their GPA and their college apps. And for this week, they are formed through serving others. Their identity for this week is made known in how they help others, in how they build friendships with other youth and how they choose to handle the challenges that come up. It's a week that leaves a big impact on each of them - it's the main story told in their senior sermons, the experience they include in their college applications and even more than that - it forms them into disciples who live out what Jesus means when he says that to be first, we must be last - it's about including others, about shifting our view from self-centered to one that has room for those who are overlooked.

Jesus says if you want to be great, you must welcome a child. Remember, at this time children were seen as non-people, possessions of their father and at the bottom of society. When Jesus says to welcome the child, who is at the bottom, he is challenging our understanding of who has wisdom and who has worth.

We don't become great by just putting a sign up that says "children are welcome." Jesus means for us to go deeper, to make a shift within our hearts and our actions. In focusing on children, we shift from thinking of ourselves to a more expanded view that encompasses everyone, even those who are still growing and developing. In bringing our attention here, we welcome those who are overlooked and our hearts expand to care for their well-being along with ours.

Not too long ago, our children completed a Faith in Action service project to organize school supplies and backpacks for children at Family Place in preparation of school starting back. Since then, the children arrive each week and ask their Sunday School teachers if it's time to do another Faith in Action project and if they can put more supplies together in backpacks.

My first reaction to their question is, oh no, we're not ready for another faith in action project! I've barely recovered from the last one. All the time it takes to put together these projects, no way are we ready for another one! But here are our children, reminding me what faith in action is really about. It's not about my to-do list or the burden it places on us adults to organize - it's about creating opportunities for our children to grow as disciples - to serve and do something for others. How easy we forget what it's all about.

If we take the time to let go...

Of the belief that to be worthy, we must achieve success

Or of the fear that holds us back

If we let go, then we just might learn what it means to be a disciple, following in our children's example and discovering that to serve brings joy, love and excitement in our hearts.

As a Christian community, we are called to open our eyes, our ears and our hearts to welcome our children, those among us who have important stories and wisdom to share. We are called as disciples to care about those in our midst who are forgotten and unseen. It might be a phone call to the person who has been sick or who is grieving, serving as a friend in faith to our youth during confirmation or taking a dish to our community meal and getting to know our neighbors in the community. Our children show us the way and when we take time to listen to them, we just might be led a little closer to discipleship, following in the way of Jesus' self-giving love. Amen.