

Welcome Such a Child
September 20, 2015
Pentecost +17
Mark 9.30-37
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"Where everyone is welcome and no one is comfortable." That's where we left off last week. We talked about how big God's welcome is for us all and how that welcome should play out here in this sacred space. Then I told you about a church called The Refuge that really does seek to welcome all, and with that promise to welcome comes a promise that doing so is not comfortable.

Last Sunday was a significant day in my life as a pastor. I can't quite name what shifted in me or exactly what I felt in this space, but something holy opened up here, as it often seems to do. Tears were shed, grief was named, space was reserved for all kinds of folks. There were "Amens" and hugs and whispered confessions. There was a lot of honesty and story-telling. In all things, there was love.

Ah, but something strange sometimes happens to me when we draw near to the Divine and to each other, when we take a vulnerable step, when I get brave and tell the truth that is burning in my chest. When it's just so good and the truth is so close, I sometimes get nervous. Within days, I felt fear for no clear reason at all. People have called and emailed to meet with me to talk about joining the church. I have heard heart-wrenching personal stories of losing and finding faith. We're at the edge of something new that excites me and energizes me and makes me feel that God is truly with us. And yet, that old record in my head starts playing. I bet you have one, too. It's the record that tells me "you don't know enough, you're not good enough." Somehow that old record begins playing on repeat and I become hyper-aware of my imperfection, my failings, my shortcomings. Some say the devil is trying to get in. Others will talk of the monkey mind and its inability to focus on the now. Yet others will speak of ego and its myopia.

I like the image of an old record, and there are so many that we play. When my "what do you know about anything, this will never work, things can never stay *this*

good for *that long*” record gets stuck in a groove, then panic sets in. When I am afraid, my thinking is clouded, and I become less trusting and more argumentative, less patient and more irritable. I know the record and I know what it does to me.

I recognized this in myself early in the week and first tried to will that charming character trait to stop, but increased efforts at control and willpower wasn't what I needed. So on Thursday afternoon I took a great big sharpie marker and blocked out two days of sabbath time. A full 48 hours of much less talking and much more listening; practicing the connection of mind and body in the same place. I shut down email and Facebook. I got very quiet. I went for a long walk in the park beneath our favorite live oaks. I listened to a podcast of my favorite preacher talking about the importance of being in the moment—not the one that's about to happen or the one that is over but the perfect, imperfect now. I went to Friday night and Saturday morning soccer games at the Fly and watched kids run their hearts out for an hour at a time. I sat with my family and basked in that time together.

Yesterday afternoon is when I think I got unstuck. I cleaned the baseboards and cabinet fronts in my kitchen. I spent two full hours cleaning my kitchen while my family attended a birthday party. I wiped down CDs that sit in a basket, cookbooks that rarely get used, the outside of the Cuisinart and the blender. I listened to music and stayed otherwise completely silent as I swept behind the refrigerator, mopped the floor, scrubbed the sink, and wiped down the stove. Of course we grab silence and prayer and reflection when we are at a crossroads or making a big decision. However, today my life is really good, things are clicking along at the church, and the word I use most often to describe this current season is grateful. And yet...when I am responding to life with fear, then something in my soul is not as it should be. And I have to get silent to wait for the word that is waiting for me. In my busy-ness and false belief that I control the world around me, I stop listening for the Divine word that reminds me, “Do not be afraid; be still.”

As I cleaned, I thought about Brother Lawrence who worked in the Carmelite monastery kitchen in 17th century France. I read his little book, *The Practice of the Presence of God*, years ago when I was working in the bakery section of the kitchen at a summer camp. Yet somehow only Friday I realized (or remembered as though for the first time) that he was not actually a member of the monastic community. He lacked the education necessary to be a proper brother and could only get a job in

the kitchen. And it was in that kitchen that he gave himself fully to God. He wrote, "We can do little things for God; I turn the cake that's frying on the pan for the love of him." And so he began to see his job every day as standing in God's presence, just the two of them, in the kitchen of the monastery. People began to notice. They began to seek him out as he washed the pots and pans or peeled the potatoes. People could feel the peace that radiated from him and would travel to watch him work.

He described his kitchen work as soul work, writing, "I began to live as if there were no one save God and me in the world...The Time of business does not with me differ from the time of prayer; and in the noise and clatter of my kitchen, while several persons are at the same time calling for different things, I possess God in as great tranquility as if I were upon my knees at the blessed sacrament."¹

And so it was, more or less, that I began to return to myself and to God with my hands in a sink of warm, soapy water, the fragrance of lavender filling the room. I don't know every step that is before me or what will come 1 and 5 and 10 years down the road. But I know that God continues to move and surprise and inspire, and somehow I am invited into that mysterious dance alongside each of you. It is enough for today.

We are in the Gospel of Mark this morning in which the disciples are my mirrors. In Mark, the disciples see Jesus do amazing things. They've watched him heal, bless, feed, and they've listened to countless teachings on what God's kingdom is like. Then one day he silenced a storm, and the disciples were afraid. They watched as he healed a child and a woman, they buried John the Baptist, but when he walked across water to meet them, they were afraid.

Now they are hearing Jesus talk about his death, and they are afraid. So afraid, in fact that they don't even ask him to explain what he's saying. Micah Kiel writes, "Although the disciples' reaction by this point is unsurprising, they have no idea what he is talking about...Fear is ubiquitous in Mark. Characters repeatedly fear

¹ *The Mayo Clinic Guide to Stress-Free Living*, p. 202

Jesus (Mark 4:35-41) or some manifestation of the Kingdom of God associated with him (Mark 5:1-20). Fear, in Mark's gospel, is the paired opposite of faith."²

The disciples follow the Markan pattern of witnessing Jesus at his best and then fearing what they have experienced while not fully understanding. It's not enough for them that they have seen, heard, and felt something that words cannot fully describe. They want to know all of the details and what happens next and what will happen a year and 5 and 10 down the road. Because they can't know everything that Jesus knows, they are afraid.

In today's story, their collective fear turns them against each other as they start arguing about who is really in control. They don't know what comes next or what it will look like, so they argue about who has the most power. If Jesus disappears but their work continues, they argue about who will take his place. If everything changes and a kingdom like the one Jesus describes really does come to earth, they don't understand how that other kingdom will work. So they argue about what kind of influence they will have in the world to come because that's the only kind of success they've known.

"Fear has this way of leading you to misperceive both threats and opportunities," writes David Lose, "of prompting impulsive and sometimes irrational behavior, and of narrowing your vision so it's difficult to see possibilities. Which is why it's hard to be wise, prudent, or compassionate when you are afraid."³ Fear "paralyzes you and drives you to look out only for yourself."

Jesus is so patient with them. He has taught them about withdrawing from their work to rest and pray. He has demonstrated again and again that God is mysteriously and powerfully present through Jesus and through his disciples. He has given them opportunities to go out in pairs and do the same healing, blessing, feeding, freeing work that he is modeling for them. And yet they still become overwhelmed. They still get scared. They still look at the power and beauty and strength and peace of this man Jesus, and they cannot comprehend it. Just like us, they fear what they cannot fully know or fully control. As they position themselves

² http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2620

³ <http://www.davidlose.net/2015/09/pentecost-17-b-faith-fear/>

for who will take charge once Jesus is gone or once Jesus does whatever it is he's trying to do, he calmly asks, "What were you arguing about on the way?"

And they are silent. He is the parent who has overheard the whole squabble and is calling their foolishness to the forefront by simply asking the question to which everyone already knows the answer. He is the friend who knows you better than anyone else and can hear the tantrum then calmly respond, "So what is all that about?" This is the Dr. Phil moment after you have justified your ridiculous behavior and he asks, "And how's that working for ya?" He knows they are arguing. He knows they are afraid. He knows they don't understand. He knows they are struggling with relinquishing control to a God they cannot see.

Even after multiple teachings, they don't comprehend this world he is describing where the least of these are children of God. Their world values wealth and social climbing. Everyone they know avoids the social class just below theirs and strives to reach up to the one above. They hear him saying all are welcome in God's kingdom, but they can't quite envision what that looks like. They hear him saying the leper, the tax collector, the beggar are near to God's heart, but the disciples aren't so sure they want to be too close to the same beloved ones. It is uncomfortable.

Somehow there's a child present. Maybe it's a large gathering. Maybe one of his followers has a baby. Maybe it's a precocious 4-year-old. We don't really know the age, but what we know from scholars like Lamar Williamson is that "The force of Jesus' action hinges upon recognition of the low esteem in which children were held in the Greco-Roman world."⁴ In our child-centered culture, we have a hard time imagining children as workers, children as liability, children pushed to the edge of polite society. But we need to hear that Jesus reaching out for the child in his midst and welcoming, loving, and making space for that child was yet another example of the broad welcome Jesus taught over and over again.

In Matthew's telling of this story, they're all challenged to become like this child —"lowliest, least, and servant of all."⁵ In Mark, Jesus identifies with the child. If you

⁴ Lamar Williamson, *Interpretation: Mark*, p. 170

⁵ Williamson, p. 170

welcome such a child as this, you welcome me. He did not promise that welcoming in this way is going to be comfortable. He stated emphatically that every welcoming act—perhaps especially the ones that are the opposite of what our culture has taught us is proper and right and true—is to be extended as though Jesus himself is being welcomed. Don't be afraid. Don't try to control the process. Just welcome. Slow down your pace, adjust your priorities, and welcome such a child as though you are welcoming Christ.

This shift in thinking is really an invitation “to imagine that abundant life comes not through gathering power but through displaying vulnerability, not through accomplishments but through service, and not by collecting powerful friends but by welcoming children.”⁶

Join me in looking at your lives honestly. Where are you stuck? What record starts playing when you are shifting from the present moment to fear of what you cannot control? What practice will bring you back into balance where mind and body are on the same path and God whispers: Don't be afraid; be still? Accept the invitation, friends, to consider the fear that limits our lives. What fears prevent you from living fully as God intended? What fears are obstacles between you and the holy welcome Christ describes? Without judgment and with great love, may you hear the question Jesus asked to his disciples, “So what were you talking about on the way?” May that simple question awaken you to the moment and draw you back to a path of active faith.

May you be brave enough to ask the question that you've been afraid to ask. May you believe that God is big enough to receive your fears. May you believe we are safe enough here to speak our truth. May you be free from fear that you might walk today in faith.

Amen.

⁶ David Lose