

Sermon 23 September 2018
Jeremiah 11:18-20; James 3:13-4:3, 7-8a; Mark 9:30-37

This morning's story from Mark comes after Jesus has performed miracles of healing and deliverance. It also comes after the Transfiguration. Earlier in the same chapter, Mark gives his account of the mountaintop experience where Jesus, transformed and radiant white, meets with Moses and Elijah. Peter, James and John are there with him when he is transformed. They hear God's voice speak from a cloud, "*This is my Son, whom I dearly love. Listen to him!*" I'm sure Peter and his companions told the other disciples about their experience on the mountain—and even though the others were not there, I'm sure they felt the privilege of being part of Jesus' inner circle.

Mark invites us to imagine what the disciples are experiencing. There are the signs and miracles, of course, and the teachings, but Mark encourages us to visualize the journey, to *see* the rabbi and his entourage crisscrossing the Holy Land. *From there Jesus and his followers went through Galilee. Then they entered Capernaum.*

One of the things we learn reading the Gospels is that Jesus was always alert and attentive. Not much escaped his notice. We remember the story of the impoverished widow putting her small copper coins in the temple offering. Jesus saw her even though she was virtually invisible to everyone else on the way to worship. Jesus saw Zacchaeus, the short and despised tax collector, perched in the sycamore tree, even though the man's neighbors refused to acknowledge him. Jesus was profoundly, deeply, perceptively awake, alert, and attentive. When they went into the house in Capernaum, he turned to his followers and asked, "*What were you arguing about during the journey?*" The disciples refuse to answer. Did they think Jesus didn't hear them?

What were they arguing about? *They had been debating with each other about who was the greatest.* They still didn't get it, did they? Jesus, of course, takes the opportunity to teach them. The lesson of the day should not have surprised them; everything Jesus said and did testified to what he wanted them to understand. *Whoever wants to be first must be least of all and the servant of all.* Jesus came serve and rescue a lost

humanity. He refused to receive honors from the adoring crowds. Mostly, he wanted to stand on the periphery of his words and actions—to let them speak of the message he came to share and the work he came to do. He was not concerned about his prestige or fame—he wanted to glorify God and to shepherd the people into a living relationship with the living God who loved them. In a strange way, especially given the history of the church, the story is not about him, and he sometimes he emphatically pointed beyond himself to the meaning and purpose of his coming. He wanted to restore humanity to its lost, intimate, *Abba* relationship with the Father—and in restoring that first relationship bring full and abundant life to all people. He came to save us and help us become fully alive.

The Way of Jesus contradicts the wisdom of the world, and as the disciples walked to Capernaum they completely missed the contradiction. They weren't asking one another for guidance about how to serve others better; they were debating which of them was the greatest. They were still laser focused on themselves.

It is interesting to me that they would have this debate when none of them had done much of anything yet. Many years ago I took leave from the church to decide about where I could best serve God. I had been a pastor for about six years, but had been offered an opportunity to study for a PhD and possibly become a theology professor. I was also considering a career in the military as a chaplain. I took a year away from pastoral ministry and worked as a salesman for Neiman Marcus, an upscale department store in Dallas.

When I started working I was almost scandalized by the prices of the things I was selling. Who, I wondered, would pay this kind of money for things they could find in other stores in the mall for a lot less. Over time, however, I adjusted. Not only did I expect the people who came to shop at Neimans to pay the prices, I began to look down on the *commoners* who were clearly out of their economic league. Sometimes they wandered into the store by mistake and were jolted by how much things cost. Sometimes they came to buy something special and took a long time to find something especially nice or different that they could

afford. Whatever their reason for being there, they clearly did not belong with *us*. Somehow, someway, at some point in my employment at the fancy store I stopped being one of the commoners and identified with the wealthy people who had no trouble buying anything they wanted. Not only were those customers the source of my modest income, they were my people—we were together in a special way.

It is a kind of insanity, but we see it in many places—waiters who look down their noses at us when we gasp at the price of a bottle on the wine list—the concierge who looks at our shoes and our haircut when we cross the polished marble lobby in the light of the crystal chandelier—the clerk at Neiman Marcus who sniffs when we buy only one Hermes silk tie. Of course, there are remarkable people who maintain their sanity in such situations, remember and value who they are, and treat others with respect regardless of their worldly status. Still, it is an all too familiar phenomenon. We are tempted to assume status by association.

The disciples are guilty. They haven't done much of anything, but because they are the closest companions of the remarkable and famous Jesus, they feel justified in considering their personal greatness. I would be funny, if it were not so sad. It is one of the great freedoms Jesus gives to his followers, one of the great freedoms of the children of God, the freedom of humble clarity about who we are. It is the counterintuitive freedom and integrity in being a servant—a servant not by necessity, but a servant by choice.

The world does not recognize the wisdom and joy of the Jesus Way; the world chooses to measure greatness by power or wealth or fame or prestige. That measure is a quagmire, a swamp of misunderstanding that separates us from one another—refuses to recognize how we are bound together. The world's measure of greatness is a path into greater and greater loneliness, a path into deprivation of the senses and the spirit. It is a path into a psychologically gated community where we do not know our neighbors. It is a path into smallness of character and superficiality. It is a path

increasingly constricted—where we are condemned to live in gilded cages thinking we are on top of the world.

The disciple of Christ knows true freedom—the truly dignified humble servant who looks out for the concerns of others is the truly free human being. Following Jesus we are free to use all the abundant gifts of life, to use a few possessions for what we need, and never to be caught in the trap of having too much. The dignified humble servant is free from the fear of not having enough, of losing what we have, of breaking a cup from our set of china dishes.

The sage is right, *contentment in the godly way is true riches, true greatness*. All the rest of it is vanity—the vanity that sucks the marrow from the bones of freedom and life—the vanity of swiftly passing days when we are tempted to lose our souls for what is only dust in the wind.

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On the road to Capernaum the disciples are walking on the precipice of losing their souls. I suspect the frontrunners on the greatness scale are Peter and James and John. The other nine would need a longer vanity reach to think of themselves as equal to the three intimates. All of them are in danger of deadly sin—of missing the core of their calling, and losing the joy of their salvation.

Through the years the church has identified seven deadly sins: lust, gluttony, greed, sloth, wrath, pride and envy. On the road to Capernaum the disciples are especially vulnerable to two of those sins—pride and envy. Both sins specialize in manufacturing the corrosive effects of endless comparisons. We spend too much of our lives comparing ourselves to others. *Who is the greatest*, they ask. It is not enough to ask how am I doing. Pridefully, we think we are better than others; enviously, we think they are better than us. All sins are deadly, but envy occupies a unique place in the list. Many people consider pride to be the deadliest of the sins, with good reason—but envy is the only one of the sins that has no redeeming moments of pleasure.

All the other sins make us feel good, at least in the beginning. All sin destroys our lives. That is why God hates sin. God judges sin out of love for us—what kills our souls grieves God and God refuses to go soft

on the sins that kill. Some sins become addictions that can even substitute for life-giving attitudes.

To live in a state of *lust* fuels entire industries of salacious behavior; pornography is one of the most lucrative and destructive manifestations of lust.

Gluttony is about more than the food we eat, but look at the portion sizes at some restaurants, especially all-you-can-eat buffets. Gluttony covers a landscape of excessive desire—certainly food, but also shopping, use of media—so many other indulgences. Gluttony is at home when literally—*we can't get enough!*

Greed is the sin that seduces us to want more and more when we have already achieved and exceeded *enough*. Saul Bellow wrote a novel entitled *Henderson the Rain King* where the protagonist lives with a voice in his head and his soul. The voice says only one thing: *I want, I want*. Greed subverts and corrupts a perfectly natural human desire to grow and achieve, by taking over and driving our ambitions without a thought for others.

Most of us think we abandon *sloth* after our teen years; we slept until noon when we could because our bodies were changing. Remember that! Sloth has many guises, but the willingness to cut corners, do far, far less than our best is always present with sloth. Slothfully, we are willing to let things go into decay. Citizens in a democracy who do not vote or work for the best of our values are slothful—willing to lazily indulge in the freedoms of a democratic society without contributing to the defense of those freedoms.

Wrath is a familiar sin to most of us. Who doubts that occasionally throwing a fit feels good—at least temporarily. Tell them off! Think of the messes we have to clean up after a feel-good bashing—the messes we make when we are not slow to anger.

Pride is the most seductive sin of all. In the company of totally destructive companions, pride stands as the first among near equals. It is the sin of the Garden, the sin of Babel, the sin that cast Lucifer out of heaven. How good it feels to feel superior! How far the fall for the prideful!

Someday we can explore those ideas more fully, but for now, let's look at *envy*. Envy has been called the green-eyed devil. It is the vice or sin that offers no compensating pleasure. All the other sins have a season of "feeling good" before the worm begins to gnaw at our intestines—affecting our attitudes and our physical and mental health. Envy alone offers no succor or pleasure even for a moment.

On the road to Capernaum the disciples dabble dangerously with the twin sins of pride and envy—sins that are totally contrary to what Jesus teaches and embodies. Sadly, even leaders of the church through the centuries have not been immune to the corrosive power of pride and envy. Just read our history! Or just look into the depths of our own hearts.

Many of the problems we are having in our country and around the world can be traced to the sins of pride and envy. The story in Mark emphasizes how prevalent and seductive those sins are, even the finest of circles. Our closing thought this morning is a word of caution. Beware whenever you find yourself making comparisons—when you are comparing yourself to someone else. There are times when comparisons can be helpful, but it is a slippery slope from healthful, encouraging, challenging, and empowering comparisons to prideful or envious comparisons. The first can be an incentive to excellence; the latter only diminishes or destroys community and distances our souls from the blessings of communion with God and others.

Who is the greatest? Who is the best? Those are not questions appropriate for the Christian.