**September 20, 2015 – 17th Sunday after Pentecost**

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Today’s reading from Mark’s Gospel starts with the group out on the road again, heading towards Capernaum. Jesus is once again trying to teach his disciples about his upcoming crucifixion and resurrection, and reminding them to keep it on the down low for now. They’re confused, but they’re too afraid for some reason to ask him what he’s talking about. The Gospel doesn’t say exactly what they were afraid of, but it’s a common reaction when we hearing bad news, to be afraid to ask anything in case there’s worse to come.

Also, we’ve skipped a good chunk of Chapter 9 at this point. The beginning of the chapter is the story of the Transfiguration, which we hear some version of on the last Sunday after Epiphany, and Luke’s version on the actual Feast of the Transfiguration in August. The Transfiguration I can understand skipping because we want to save that for a special occasion, but there’s another skipped story that might help shed a little light on the disciple’s state of mind. It’s found in all three synoptic Gospels, that is, Matthew, Mark, and Luke, but for some reason is never read in the course of the Revised Common Lectionary.

It’s the story of the healing of an epileptic boy. Of course, he’s not actually described as having the disease of epilepsy, but rather as being possessed by a demon that causes him to have what is unmistakably a grand mal seizure. Interesting Greek fact – the word “epilepsy” comes from the Greek, naturally, since many medical words do. It’s a combination word from the two words “epi,” meaning upon or over, and “lambano,” which means to take hold of by force. So even today, epilepsy has the connotation of being possessed by an outside agency.

But back to the healing story. It’s pretty typical – the boy’s father brings the boy to Jesus, who casts the demon out and heals him. But there are a couple of interesting wrinkles to this story. First of all, Jesus has quite a long conversation with the father, especially long for the Gospel of Mark. The father tells him in detail about the boy’s plight, and then says, somewhat tentatively, “If you can do anything, have pity on us and help us.”

And Jesus says to him, “If you are able, all things are possible to one who believes.” And the father yells out – literally, he shrieks, "I believe; help my unbelief!" And Jesus went ahead and cured the boy. Kind of a weird turnaround in the midst of all the stories we’ve had about faith and believing.

Another weird thing about this story is that the father tells Jesus that he had first asked the disciples to cast out the demon, but they weren’t able to. Well, well, well. So everything didn’t go as well as the disciples had originally reported, huh? But to their credit, they did ask him why they failed and he said to them, “This kind cannot be driven out by anything but prayer.” And he leaves it at that. Not the most enlightening of answers, which may have led to their confusion on the road.

So they’re walking along and Jesus is trying to tell them some pretty important things, but by this time they’re completely frozen by confusion and fear. They’d been yelled at for arguing with Jesus about his teachings about his own death, they’d not understood some basic principle about casting out demons, and now here he was talking again about dying.

And what do people sometimes do when they’re faced with too many things to handle at once? They check out. And this, again, very human response is what I think the disciples did. Remember, these were Jesus’ hand-picked companions. They weren’t just some goombahs off the street who decided to hang around with the new prophet on the block. Jesus must have seen something in them.

But they WERE only human, and humans make mistakes – sometimes merely foolish, and sometimes terrible. I can just hear them joshing and maybe even bragging about who was the greatest disciple. “Jesus called me first, so obviously I’m the greatest.” says Peter. “Oh yeah?” says Andrew. “Well, I’m not so sure he was talking to you that day. I was there, too.” “Oh yeah?” says John. “Well, Jesus likes me best.” “Oh yeah?”

You get the idea. Harmless stuff, really. But when Jesus asks them what they were arguing about, there was a deafening silence. Kind of like when you hear suspicious thumps upstairs and you yell, “What’s going on up there, kids?” And the thumping stops suddenly and there is…silence. Guilty silence.

I can imagine the disciples looking up at the ceiling, and maybe even whistling an innocent tune, and Jesus shaking his head and sighing and then sitting down with the, to explain the situation to them.

“First of all,” he tells them, “let’s drop this whole ‘who’s the greatest’ line of thinking. Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all. End of discussion.” Then he pulls a little child into his lap and tells the disciples “See this kid? If you receive and welcome this little one – not kings, not priests, not wealthy people – but the most helpless and powerless among you, it’s the same as welcoming me. And not just me, but it’s the same as welcoming God.”

In then Greco-Roman world of the 1st century, of which Palestine was a part, hierarchy was everything. Your importance in the world was directly measured by your wealth and influence, which went hand in hand. And the only way to increase either wealth or influence was to hobnob with people who were more wealthy and influential than you were, and to shun those who were lower down on the food chain. Servants and children, though both were necessary to the well-oiled machine of Roman society, were not even ON the food chain and were certainly not to be acknowledged, much less welcomed into someone’s home.

So here is Jesus telling his disciples to strive to be the lowest they could possibly be on the totem pole, and to offer hospitality to those who might even be lower than they were. NOT what the disciples were expecting from their king!

This idea of the last being first, and welcoming the lowest members of society (or becoming like a little child, as Matthew puts it) is central to Jesus’ concept of discipleship, but couldn’t be further from our own experience. Aren’t we told to strive to get ahead? Aren’t we told that there are winners and losers in life, and that we should try to be among the winners? Aren’t we told, in effect, that life is a zero sum game and it’s better to be on the winning team?

Just listen to political rhetoric, of which there is SO much these days. Or listen to advertising, or business discussions, or sports, or commentary on world affairs. The list goes on and on. Our whole society is built upon conflict and getting ahead. It’s not built upon humility and mercy, but rather pride and greed. It’s certainly not built upon the basics of what Jesus demands of us – service, meekness, and faith.

And this didn’t start yesterday, or even with the founding of this country. James, in his letter that we read part of today, was addressing these same problems back in the first century.

*[I]f you have bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not be boastful and false to the truth. Such wisdom does not come down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, devilish. For where there is envy and selfish ambition, there will also be disorder and wickedness of every kind.*

*Do [those conflicts and disputes] not come from your cravings that are at war within you? You want something and do not have it; so you commit murder. And you covet something and cannot obtain it; so you engage in disputes and conflicts. Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you.*

It’s simple. It’s so simple that it seems almost impossible. But it’s not impossible, because with God all things are possible. Even changing our lives in order to follow the pattern that Jesus set for us. When the disciples were mystified as to why they couldn’t cast out the boy’s demon, Jesus told them that it was only possible by prayer. Nothing they did under their own power would work.

And that’s how we cast out the demons of our own worldliness – by prayer. Prayer together as a community, and prayer just between ourselves and God. And one of the strongest prayers we can pray is “Help my unbelief!” We all have times when it seems like believing is just too hard. But God listens to that prayer and always answers it.

If we trust our faith the Holy Spirit, the rest will come easier and easier. That’s God’s eternal promise to us – a promise that was fulfilled by his Son’s life, death, and resurrection.

God, in your mercy, help our unbelief.

Amen.