

"The Greatest?"

Sermon for First Christian Church of Decatur, Georgia
Season of Pentecost, Sunday, September 23, 2018
James L. Brewer-Calvert, Senior Pastor

Holy Scriptures: 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."

OUTLINE

We find in the passage of Holy Scripture three major themes,
three themes that are interrelated, inseparable, and instructive.

1. The Cross as Restoration
2. The Challenge of Narcissism
3. The Celebration of Reception

Citations with page numbers are from
William H. Willimon, "Pulpit Resource"
Vol. 40, No. 3, Year B, July-September 2012.

Trigger Warning: Please be forewarned that toward the latter part of the sermon I share with you, Gentle Reader, recent public conversations about rape, molestation, and sexual harassment. You and yours are in my prayers. Shalom.

Sermon

Engaged with God

Jesus was teaching His disciples.

*He said 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."
So, the disciples, instead of asking for clarification or seeking deeper understanding,
"on the way they had argued with one another who was the greatest."
If anything, God is omniscient.
God in Christ overheard their banter and bickering and boasts.
Pressed by Jesus to 'fess up, they grew silent.
He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them,
"Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all."
In response to their empty boasts and overly-full egos,
Jesus broke it down for the disciples
in a way He hoped they'd understand.

Jesus the Teacher is all about object lessons.
At a well He spoke of Living Water.
At a blossoming shrub He pointed out the growth of a mustard seed.
At the Lord's Table He lifted a common Cup of Salvation and shared the Bread of Life.
Surrounded by disciples all full of themselves
yet unable or unwilling to comprehend the Cross,
He welcomed into the circle of adults a small child.
A child was a living being who was basically invisible in their culture.
To the disciples, to their society, children should be neither seen nor heard.
Jesus held the child in His arms and said,
*"Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me,
and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me."*

Jesus taught his followers and He is teaching us today
about the Cross, about Salvation, about Atonement;
yet there is a lot we don't understand.
The disciples had troubles grasping his biblical and theological lessons.
When confronted by Him, they often got too quiet or stumbled and bumbled.
We been there, and I fall in that category on a regular basis.
We don't want to look stupid or sound ignorant, so we don't ask for guidance.
We don't want to be a bother, so we don't seek help.
We don't bother our teachers whom we perceive to be busy,
too busy for our questions, our queries, our wonderings.
We slip by the hard part of being generous and skip ahead to being great.
We act like appearance matters the most.
Ours, that is.
We live in a culture that is preoccupied, obsessed, with cultivating ourselves.

Oscar Wilde is reported to have said to someone at a party,
"Come over here and sit next to me. I'm dying to tell you all about myself."

Ever not understand what the Voice of God
is teaching you, showing you, calling you into?
Take a number.
You are not alone.
Let's process, together, whatever it is Jesus was teaching, as best we can,
raising questions and seeking wisdom
as students of the Teacher whose Love is both guide and grace.

Engaged with God

How many of us have been presented with the pie-in-the-sky theology
that the Cross of Jesus Christ
is all about God's desire to carry us away
from this miserable, wicked world up to heaven,
that salvation is the Lord's ultimate escape plan.
The more we read the teachings of Jesus
and get in tune with His atonement – "At-One-Ment" –
the clearer it becomes that salvation, the saving, redeeming action of
God,
is not so much God's will
to snatch us up from a rotten world, a botched creation,
as it is to yoke us into God's loving activity,
to enlist us in God's cosmic restoration, fulfillment,
and grand reworking of creation in Jesus Christ,
here, now. (Willimon, adapted. P.
16)

"Some people think of the cross of Christ
as our way to get to be with God in heaven when we die.
Surprisingly, the Gospels portray the cross
as God's way to get heaven to earth now.
...Thanks to God's reconciling work in Christ,
[today] we can get to God because God has gotten to us.
On the cross, Jesus' sacrifice and love did something decisive
about the distance between God [and Creation,
between God and humanity,
between God and you and me.]
In the crucifixion, God had made a way to us, in love." (Willimon, adapted, P. 55)

When Jesus touched and taught and healed and blessed people on the way,
they did not walk away from their encounter with God saying,
*"At last! God has finally done something about my personal sin,
and one fine day I will get to go to heaven."*

Rather, it was as if the first folks Jesus saved and redeemed and restored
looked all the way back to Genesis and remembered that Creation is good.
They affirmed that people are made good, made in the image of God,
that people are blessed, for we are Original Blessings.
They recognized that the whole people of God
have backslid or slipped, behaved badly or simply nibbled our way lost.

They say that a farmer named Boudreaux suspected his wife of hanky-panky
"Marie," Boudreaux whispered to her late one night,
"if I die, would you get married again?"
"Yeah, I guess," she replied.
"Would you give him my pick-up truck?"
"No, Boudreaux. I would never give him your pick-up truck," she said.
"Besides, he doesn't know how to drive a stick shift."

Engaged with God

"Martin Luther defined 'sin' as "the heart curved in on itself."
Curved in on ourselves,
focusing mostly upon our needs, our aches and pains,
we wither and die.
This is the sin that afflicts us today." (Willimon, P. 38)

The Good News is that the love of God in Christ
promises and has the power to restore us to wholeness,
to empower us see and hear and bear witness
that "*whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.*"

And now, thanks to the love of God in Christ and the saving power of the Cross,
we are partners in Christ's service,
partners to heal the world, to restore that which is fragmented,
to bear grace and be grace and become grace,
love in action with some skin on it. (Willimon, adapted,
16)

The Cross is a sign and symbol and saving mark not of escapism but of enlistment.
We are enlisted, entrusted and engaged in God's cosmic restoration
of your life and mine, this community and city, and all the nations of the world.

Engaged with God

Flannery O'Conner has a story about a little girl
who loves to visit the convent and the sisters who live there. (Willimon, P. 52)

But every time she arrives at the convent and the nun gives her a hug,
the crucifix on Sister's belt gets mashed into the girl's face.
The gesture of love always leaves a mark of the cross on the little girl's cheek.

Take Flannery O'Connor's story as a parable:
Christ's love tends to mark all those whom it touches.

Recall our liturgical practice on Ash Wednesday.
We come forward to receive the cross upon our foreheads, marked in ash.
We are marked, claimed, and defined
by the love of God in the cross,
bearing God's mark into the world.

The Cross of Christ is not a symbol of escapism;
it's a covenant to be present.
Salvation is a gift of God,
by God, from sin and death,
for life and love,
for a life lived with God, now. (Willimon, adapted, P.
16)

Paul expressed it this way:
*"So, if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation:
everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!
¹⁸ All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ,
and has given us the ministry of reconciliation;
¹⁹ that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to Godself,
not counting their trespasses against them,
and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us.
²⁰ So we are ambassadors for Christ,
since God is making his appeal through us;
we entreat you on behalf of Christ,
be reconciled to God." (2 Corinthians 5: 17-20)*

"This is the whole Gospel preached while standing on one foot.
Assignment follows gift.
Exhortation follows right after proclamation.
Human response is demanded after divine initiative." (Willimon, adapted)

God is reclaiming the world through love.
"God in Christ is recovering the world unto Godself." –2 Corinthians 5: 19
We entreat you, on behalf of God,
to be reconciled into God and practice reconciliation daily.
And the Divine initiative is remarkable:
Love God. Love one another. Love yourself. Here. Now.

"My Bible tells me that for the Crown we wear there is first the Cross we must bear,"
said Dr. Martin Luther King.
"Bear it, for you shall reap what you sow.
Bear it for truth, for truth pressed to earth will rise again.
Bear it for justice, for the moral ark of the universe is long, but it bends toward justice."

The Gospel of Mark is called "one long passion story." (Willimon, p 52)
Mark [takes us on] a long walk with Jesus to the cross.
Passion—from the Latin word "to suffer"—is the story of Jesus' life among us.
He is presented to us as the one who suffers and is rejected.
He does relatively little teaching and preaching in Mark.
Maybe because His lessons on the Cross are hard to explain.
Maybe because His disciples don't want to hear or learn that they will suffer, too.
His followers who follow the One True God whom Jesus follows
are taught that the way of the Cross is not optional equipment.
Sacrificial giving and living.
Service above Self.
"Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all."

Y'all recall the children's sermon here when I told the kids to line up, I had cookies to hand out. Then I went to the back of the line and started with the last.
Ooohh, the ones in front stomped their feet!
"But we were first!" they said.

The beloved disciples hear this talk about the first being last,
witness Jesus' love for the lost and the least,
receive attention and inspiration and education.
Yet their response is to focus on the self rather than on the soul.
Who among us is the greatest?

Engaged with God

C. S. Lewis, in Surprised by Joy, speaks of his conversion to Christ
as an act God worked in him that was almost coercive in its effect,
that time when *"God closed in on me."*

C. S. Lewis came to the cross [of Jesus]
"as a prodigal who is brought in kicking, struggling, resentful,
and darting his eyes in every direction at a chance to escape."

The Church, like the disciples, gets tempted to focus on the self.
We get tempted to present or portray and portend Jesus as a solution,
as a problem solver,
as a 10-easy-steps-to-a-cure book found in the self-help section.

This is not anywhere close
to what Christ was talking about
when He told the disciples about the way of the Cross, that
"Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all."

My Lord and my God!

Here we are, in the now, calling for the beyond to come down here,
to reconcile heaven and earth,
not to escape the world but to bring the best of heavenly love
to bear in our relationships, in our politics,
in our courtrooms, in our faithful stewardship,
at our kitchen tables and in the workplace,
in our heartfelt prayers for Mother Earth and one
another.

We talk about seeing and listening to the invisible, the voiceless, the hurt and hurting.
When we prayerfully call for love to be made real on earth as it is in heaven,
we bring divine love to bear in times and places
where charity seems so absent, so distant, it's disquieting.

Engaged with God

This has been a tough week for Love.
Are you like me, spellbound--but not quite speechless—and appalled—but not quitting.

*"Less than a week after Christine Blasey Ford spoke publicly for the first time
about her allegations against Brett Kavanaugh,
Donald Trump defended his Supreme Court nominee on Twitter
and suggested that Ford was not telling the truth."*

(Madhuri Sathish, "Bustle", September 21, 2018)

Donald Trump tweeted:

*"I have no doubt that, if the attack on Dr. Ford was as bad as she says,
charges would have been immediately filed with local Law Enforcement Authorities
by either her or her loving parents.*

I ask that she bring those filings forward so that we can learn date, time, and place!"

Within hours over 38,000 people responded
about why they did not report their assaults,
and many more have since added their voices.

Americans are tweeting and sharing that they too
had been raped, molested or sexually harassed,
but were too traumatized or afraid or shamed at the time
to report the horrors they experienced.

*"Actress Alyssa Milano... replied directly to Trump,
letting him know that she was sexually assaulted twice*

but never filed a police report.

*Other Twitter users quickly chimed in,
talking about the various reasons for which they did not report their experiences.
As CNN pointed out, there are so many different reasons
survivors don't report sexual assault...
...the thousands of tweets under the #WhyIDidntReport hashtag make that clear.
Some [people] are made to feel as though it was their fault,
others are pressed for more evidence and asked to relive their trauma,
and still others are worried about personal or legal repercussions.”
(Madhuri Sathish, Bustle, September 21, 2018)*

I repeat their truth because it's my truth as well.
My kith and kin include beloved family members
who had been raped or molested or sexually harassed
but were too traumatized or afraid or shamed at the time
to report the horrors they experienced.

God in Christ stands with the suffering and the sinners,
with both victims and victimizers,
alleviating pain and renouncing sin.

God Calls us to stand up to the principalities and powers,
to stand with the oppressed,
to take a stand for the moral arc that bends toward justice.

God calls for heaven to come down to earth to save us,
redeem us, restore us to wholeness, in love.

Engaged with God

When Christ calls to the Church to follow the One who sent Him,
to take up our Cross and follow Him on the way,
the way is made known
by those whom the world neglects, rejects, and dejects.

This ministry we are doing and being is cosmic;
we are taking back and restoring the world through the grace of God.

Jesus calls to Himself and picks up a child.

Whom do you think God is calling to you to pick up and welcome,
to recognize and restore?

Our changes of heart make it even more possible for our neighbors to be restored.

*“Last summer Ken Parker participated in the Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville.
A former grand dragon of the KKK,
 {Ken Parker} had joined a Nazi group
 after concluding the KK wasn’t hateful enough.
His intention in going to the white supremacist rally was to start a race war.*

*Over the past year he had a change of heart
 through getting to know an African American neighbor,
 William McKinnon III, pastor
 at All Saints Holiness Church in Jacksonville, Florida.
Ken Parker was recently baptized in McKinnon’s mostly black church.”*

(NBC News, August 9, 2018. Reported in Christian Century, 9-12-18, P. 8.)

This is the hope of the Cross of Christ: cosmic restoration, one soul at a time, together.
Here.
Now.
Forever and Ever.

All power be to the Creator, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen!