

King of Glory Lutheran Church
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Year B: 17th Sunday after Pentecost: Mark 9:30-37
Rev. Debra Abbott

Mark 9:30-37

³⁰They went on from there and passed through Galilee. He did not want anyone to know it; ³¹for 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.” ³²But they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him.

³³Then they came to Capernaum; and when he was in the house he asked them, “What were you arguing about on the way?” ³⁴But they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another who was the greatest. ³⁵He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, “Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.” ³⁶Then he took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms, he said to them, ³⁷“Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.”

Have you ever been afraid to ask a question?

Maybe in a classroom when you didn't understand something and you were afraid your question would sound foolish.

Or maybe it was in a place unfamiliar to you when you got lost and couldn't find the spot you were trying to get to?

I suspect that the questions most of us find hardest to ask are more personal. Questions like: Do you love me? Why did you hurt me? Will you forgive me?

I've been thinking about questions this week, especially the ones we are afraid to ask.

There is a lot going on in our gospel reading from Mark today. As I have spent time with this text this past week the verse that has stuck with me is verse 32, “But they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him.”

Once again, as we find so often in the gospel of Mark, the disciples don't get Jesus or fully understand who he is. And today we find out that sometimes, they are even afraid to ask him their questions.

Imagine for a moment what it was like to be one of Jesus' first disciples. What have you seen and heard from Jesus? What do you think you know about Jesus? What is impossible to comprehend? What questions do you have for Jesus? And which one are you most afraid to ask?

There are three times in the gospel of Mark, one right after another, when Jesus predicts his death and the disciples do not or will not fully grasp what he is saying.

The first is at the end of chapter 8. "Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again."

Peter takes Jesus aside and says no, don't say that. And Jesus says, "Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things."

And then Jesus offers a teaching about what it means to follow him. "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me."

A few verses later in our gospel reading today a similar exchange happens in the middle of chapter 9. Jesus says, "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."

This time the gospel writer tells us that "they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him."

When they get to Capernaum Jesus offers another teaching saying, "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all."

And then in the middle of chapter 10 Jesus again speaks of his death saying, "the Son of Man will be handed over to the chief priests and the scribes, and they will condemn him to death; then they will hand him over to the Gentiles; they will mock him, and spit upon him, and flog him, and kill him; after three days he will rise again."

This time there is a question asked. James and John ask to sit at his right and left side in his glory. And Jesus asks them if they really understand what they are asking.

Jesus goes on to speak to all the disciples saying, “whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave to all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.”

Jesus says hard things. Especially in these three chapters in the gospel of Mark. It must have been incredible for the disciples to hear Jesus say that he would be betrayed, killed and in three days rise again. It is understandable that they didn't know exactly what Jesus was talking about. But what were they afraid to ask him?

Maybe they wanted to ask why should Jesus die? Or how would God let it happen? Or what did Jesus mean when he said he would rise again after being dead three days? But they don't ask.

Maybe they didn't want to reveal how confused they really were. Maybe they thought they should understand everything Jesus said without help. Or maybe they couldn't bear the thought of Jesus suffering and dying.

Dr. Amy G. Oden, Professor of Early Church History and Spirituality, currently teaching for several seminaries, asks some excellent questions of her own about our gospel reading today. She writes, “How would this story be different if the disciples *had* asked Jesus their questions? What kind of conversation might have ensued between Jesus and his disciples? What kind of relationship would it have engendered with each other?”

And then she goes on, “How would our stories be different if we ask Jesus our questions? What kind of conversations might we pursue with Jesus? How would our life as disciples together be different as a result?”¹

Today I wonder if we can both recognize the disciples' fear and discomfort and then challenge ourselves to do something different.

What if we acknowledged our own fear and our own questions? How might our life together as disciples be different if we shared our questions with Jesus and each other?

I know there are spaces where we offer opportunities in this congregation to ask questions and you may already have your own safe spaces or communities where you can ask questions about faith and life. That might be in Bible study, or in a Confirmation class, with a trusted friend, with your family or in your daily prayers.

¹ Oden, Amy G., *Commentary on Mark 9:30-37*, September 23, 2012, www.workingpreacher.org.

Wherever you find opportunity, it is so important for us to find or create safe spaces and communities to ask our questions. When we do this we open up places to share our fears and all the things we don't know and don't have answers for. And in those spaces and places we can listen for Jesus' wisdom, learn from one another and sometimes simply sit with all the questions we don't have answers for together. But it begins with asking questions.

So today, spend some time thinking or talking about what questions you have for Jesus. Know that every question is important. There is no question out of bounds or too big for God who is with us on our journey always.

The answers may not and probably will not come easily but when we ask questions we are beginning a conversation. A conversation that both opens up the possibility of answers we never considered and also creates a space to live together in the unknown.

Today our gospel reading concludes with Jesus taking a child in his arms as he says, "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me."

Jesus' actions and words remind us most profoundly today that he welcomes all into his presence. The young and the old, the wise and the foolish, the rich and the poor, the ones who can't hold back their questions and the ones who hold them in their hearts.

Jesus was sent to us that we might know God among us and with us. That we might know a God who experienced suffering, has power over death and has given us the promise of eternal life.

So ask all your questions trusting that they will be welcomed and heard. May you know God's presence with you always on your journey, in your conversations and especially in the midst of all your questions.

Amen.