

Mark 9:30-37
Pentecost 17-B-21
“What Will We Do with Jesus?”
Rev. Randy Smith

A Presbyterian pastor in Georgia shares this from her childhood:

I have two wonderful younger brothers, whom I love very much. On the whole, we got along pretty well as a trio growing up. The glaring exception to this, though, is whenever we would get in a car to go somewhere. I mean literally going to get in the car. It started innocently enough. Mom or Dad would say it was time to go, one of us would call “Front Seat” (some of you know this as “calling shotgun”). That evolved into a rule between us that you had to actually be *in view of the car* before you could call it. But words didn’t last long. Claiming the front seat became a literal battle for who could physically get into the seat first. It wasn’t very pretty, and didn’t take long for our youngest brother, Ben, to become collateral damage as he tried to keep up with his older siblings. The last straw for my mother was the day Ben’s arm got caught in the car door as either Philip or I slammed it shut trying to cement our claim on the seat.

"Today’s gospel text," she concludes by saying, "is a **little less violent**, but shows a similar wrestling among the disciples for who gets the front seat."

I begin the sermon this morning by sharing her childhood story because I suspect that, except for those of you who were raised in a 1-child family, her story strikes a chord, and also serve to help us remember just how far back in life it is that the desire to be the "greatest" -- the one who gets to ride in the front seat, the one who gets to be the line leader in Preschool, the one who makes the team *and* gets to start, the one who makes first violin in orchestra, the one who gets the full scholarship to the college of her/his choice, the one who gets the job over dozens of other interviewees, the one who gets recognized and regularly promoted in his/her career field, the one who gets to retire at age 58 with a liquid "nest egg" (in addition to a pension) of some \$4 million (cf. Brian Hoch).

This whole way of life, i.e., starts early, and it seems practically genetic in the human species. But, of course, it's not. It's learned behavior. It's origin in our species is not in our genes but rather in the way of life-together we humans tend toward, almost universally, a way of life together with others based on **fear**, specifically a **fear of scarcity**, on the fear of there never being enough -- enough of all the things which make life possible -- to go around. So, we -- each of us -- want to be in the front seat, or in the driver's seat, in order to be sure we get first dibs on all the things which make life, not just possible, but also good. Comfortable. Convenient.

But, most of all, **secure**.

The Gospel reading for this morning begins with Jesus saying again to his first followers what he had *first tried* to tell them in the preceding chapter, namely that what lay ahead for *him*, however, was betrayal and death -- but *also* resurrection. Even on this second telling, however, the Gospel writer, Mark, makes it clear that "they did not understand what he was saying, and were afraid to ask him" (9:32). Suffice to say, however, that such talk on Jesus' part was enough to make them feel **insecure** -- *viz.*, **vulnerable**.

Which leads them in turn -- as it does for all of us -- to try to shore up their sense of strength, and in the way most of us try to do this, namely by **comparing ourselves with others**. In their case, this means thinking along the lines of, "Well, I may not be a perfect follower of Jesus, but at least I'm better than _____" (fill in the blank), a frame of mind which then spills out into actual conversation between them, each of them ready, willing and able to point out the failings in their peers. Have you ever known people whose fundamental insecurities in life meant that the *only* way they could build themselves *up* was by tearing others *down*? That's what is going on in this scene, *almost*, but not *quite* out of Jesus' hearing.

When Jesus and his first followers arrive back home -- at Capernaum -- Jesus makes it a point to sit everyone down and talk about what had just taken place in the group along the way. Yes, it's *that* important. **Why?**

In the Letter of James, in a passage from cc. 3-4 (which was another of the Scripture readings for today), the writer speaks to our **chronic human habit of vying for position** in relation to others. He says, "But if you have **bitter envy** and **selfish ambition** in your hearts, do not be boastful and false to the truth...For where there is envy and selfish ambition there will *also* be **disorder and wickedness** of *every* kind."

What's important here is to understand that neither what Jesus nor James are talking about -- in terms of vying for position -- are mere personal peccadillos, or unfortunate personal habits. They are instead **confronting** one of the **foundational structures** of an *unGodly* way of life in the world, namely our unceasing competition with others ("selfish ambition"), and the "bitter envy" which results when our selfish ambitions are not realized, leading us into "disorder and wickedness of every kind".

Envy. According to Webster, "Envy is most often used to refer to a covetous feeling toward another person's attributes, possessions, or stature in life." Envy actually goes all the way back to the Ten Commandments. It's the other side of the coin of the 10th Commandment, against covetousness. From there, it became one of the "Seven Deadly Sins" in ancient Christian tradition, a list first compiled back in the 6th-c. AD, the other six being pride, anger, sloth, greed, gluttony, and lust. What made these sins -- which were all *internal*

predispositions -- "deadly" was that they led to *external actions* which caused harm to others (and, ultimately, to ourselves).

These internal predispositions were, you will recall, of great significance to Jesus. E.g., in his teaching in the SOTM:

“You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, ‘You shall not murder’; and ‘whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.’ But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment...” (Mt. 5:21-22).

The murder we commit in our hearts, i.e., **is** -- at least within the new family of God which Jesus, through such preaching, came to renew -- *viz.*, the Church -- actually more problematic, in God's eyes, than the actual deed.

Every day, all across our lives, we are bombarded with messages, from all kinds of sources, that are designed to *fuel* our envy and our selfish ambition. What we *have* is **not enough**, which means that what we *are* is **not enough**. Our whole chosen way of life, in fact, *depends* on these driving forces. Economists say that 70% of the American economy is consumption by consumers who – for a whole host of reasons – think they don’t already have enough. And it starts early in life. Cf. the preschooler in Target on Friday: "I want...I *need* the ultimate Barbie!" So, how are the followers of Jesus -- then or now -- supposed to *protect* themselves against, supposed to be able to *resist* the domination of, these *powerful* social forces?

To answer that question, Jesus makes use of an *equally* powerful -- if not *more* powerful -- "visual aid":

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.” (9:36-37)

You should know that Jesus is not making here anything like the sentimental appeal we are inclined to make to children -- that they are sweet, and cute, and innocent, etc. Those sentiments are a "First World" and modern kind of luxury. No, by taking a little child into his arms, Jesus is reflecting the 1st-c. reality -- and a reality still prevalent in the 21st-c. in most of the world -- about children, namely, that they are **the most vulnerable** citizens of planet earth.

By taking a child into his arms, Jesus is *reinforcing* what he has just said about being the "greatest" in God's eyes. He wants to *redirect* his first followers *away* from any sort of **rivalry** over *status* with *each other*, and toward **seeing** -- *noticing* -- and **servicing** "**all**", *even* those whose lives would seem to matter little to the overall trajectory of life in the world. To be "servant of all" in the 1st-c. AD, meant *not* just that you were a servant of *everyone*, but that you were the **lowliest** servant in the household, the one who served everyone else their supper, and then waited on them to eat all they wanted, and then -- for *your* supper -- ate what they left on their plates.

For a long while, all the striving we do for ourselves, in rivalry with others, has been called the "rat race". The expression originates from laboratory experiments in which two rats are trying to outrun each other in a maze, in order to get a piece of cheese. In the process, they spend more energy than the reward is worth.

I remember the Senior Pastor at Mauldin UMC's Christmas gift to me in my first year under appointment there as his Associate. It was a mug that showed a rat in running shoes and said simply: "Welcome to the rat race." I think he did this because he saw me as an overly idealistic young pastor. He was right. I was. Pastors, I quickly learned, are no less susceptible to the rat race than are people in general.

Jesus came among us, in complete vulnerability, gave himself into human hands, to the point of death, even death on a cross, in order to finally distract us from our fatal attraction to the rat race -- fatal first of all for the most vulnerable all around, and fatal, finally, to our own souls.

What will we do with this vulnerable Jesus? Will we learn the saving lesson he came to teach? Or will we account him to be of not much use to us in trying to win the rat race?