

Lectionary 25/Proper 20 (B)  
September 20, 2009  
Text: Mark 9:30-37

Pastor Aaron J. Couch  
First Immanuel Lutheran Church  
Portland, Oregon

7<sup>th</sup> grade math was not a fun ride. And I can still remember the point at which it seemed like the wheels came off, and it felt like the whole thing came to crashing stop. It was multiplying and dividing fractions. My math teacher was from Pakistan, and because of his accent I had a devil of a time understanding what he was saying. But I was in a new school, where I didn't know anyone, and I didn't want to ask a stupid question, because I didn't want anyone to think I was stupid. As a result, I sat quietly at my desk, getting more and more confused by the minute. It was like a fog settling in, and I had no idea how to do what the teacher was talking about.

It's memories like that that give me some real sympathy for the disciples. I don't know that they ever found Jesus easy to understand—after all he was trying to get them to see the world in a whole new way. The world they knew operated according to the “golden rule”: the one with the gold makes the rules. It's a “nature-red-in-tooth-and-claw” sort of world, where everybody tries to scratch and claw their way to the top. But Jesus was trying to help them see—that's not what God is up to. God is creating something surprising and new in the human family, and it's taking shape through Jesus' life and work.

So as they passed through Galilee, Jesus tried to help them see and understand this new thing God was doing. In the past, people had always thought of the Messiah as a “charging-in-on-a-white-horse” kind of guy, one who would lead God's people to freedom by destroying their enemies. But Jesus wanted them to see that his job was different than that. What God was doing in his life and work would not involve white horses, or swords or shields or armies. It would involve betrayal and condemnation and suffering and death, and then vindication by God, being raised to new life in order to be able to wield—not the sword—but the power of forgiveness, to set people free from sin and self-serving, to be part of God's reign of love and peace.

Jesus wanted to prepare them for what lay ahead, so he told them as clearly and plainly as he could. But they didn't understand. They thought he was using some difficult figure of speech. Maybe this talk about dying and after three days being raised—maybe it was like some of those difficult parables he told. Or maybe it was like the time when he told them to beware of the yeast of the Pharisees—and they thought maybe he was talking about... bread? They couldn't figure out what this figure of speech, about dying and rising, might mean. But they were afraid to ask. Every single one of them was afraid to look stupid. Because in truth, they didn't see themselves as a community of fellow-learners who were all learning from Jesus together. Instead they saw each other as “competition,” and when Jesus came into his power, they all wanted to be ready to scratch and claw their way to the top, to be Jesus' right hand man.

That's why on the way they were arguing about who was the greatest. I wonder what that sounded like. Was it like comparing resumés? Did Matthew say, "You know, I think my experience as a tax collector for the Romans could be quite valuable to Jesus"? And did Peter reply, "As a fisherman, I was an independent businessman, which I think gives me a uniquely helpful perspective to offer Jesus"? And did John say, "Come on, we all know he likes me best"? Whatever it was they said, Jesus knew what they were up to.

So he tried one more time. He told them, "If you're so obsessed with being first, then you ought to know that the only thing that really matters spiritually, that matters with regard to having a real human life, is giving of yourself in service to others." He even tried using an object lesson. He took a child and said, "If you welcome a child, you welcome me, and in fact you welcome God." And this is probably where it's easiest for us to miss Jesus' point, because we think of childhood in terms of innocence and wonder. But it wasn't that way in Jesus' time. Children had no power or status. Nobody would pay attention to a child because they were unimportant little nobodies. So when Jesus swept a child up in his arms, most likely none of the disciples had even noticed the child before. And that's why Jesus did it, to say, "If you welcome those who are unimportant, invisible, without status, when it doesn't offer any benefit to you to do so—then you have welcomed me. If your attitude in life is to receive and care for those in need, those on the margins, then you have welcomed God into your life.

I'm not sure how well the disciples understood Jesus' object lesson. And for that matter Jesus' followers through the generations have all too often gotten it disastrously wrong. Far too much of the Church's history is conquests and crusades and witch hunts and pogroms. It's a story of people who, in the certainty of their own rightness, mounted their white horses and took up the sword to establish God's kingdom. It's adventures in missing the point, and it grieves me to see Jesus' message of love and forgiveness distorted beyond all recognition. It grieves me, but it doesn't surprise me, because I recognize in my own life the tendency to miss the point, to hate my enemies instead of love them, to wish them ill instead of pray for them.

Yet no amount of misunderstanding is enough to stop Jesus, or cause him to take his eyes off the last and the least, to prevent him from offering up his life for the healing of God's creation. In his passionate care and concern for all who suffer, and finally in his own Passion on the cross, Jesus has stripped away the illusions that confuse us, that fool us into thinking that this life is all about us, and all about getting what we want. And for those who have learned from Jesus how to see the world in a new way, Jesus is leading the way, inviting us to follow, to be a community of fellow-learners who are discovering in Jesus the key to a life worth living. In his way of forgiveness and service and generosity, Jesus not only shows us what is necessary to live with a deep and abiding sense of peace, to know ourselves as God's treasured children and to be sustained with hope; Jesus also

shows us how to be part of a future that is full of life and blessing, to not continue to be part of the problem (with our white horses and our swords), but instead to enter into the wonderful new world of peace and gentleness and compassion that God is giving birth to.

People of God, precious children of God, that is your own truest life. This is the life that God has claimed you for in baptism, the gift God gives you freely. This is the life that Jesus nurtures in you every time he speaks to you through his Word and feeds you with the bread and wine from his table. Certainly there are times when we misunderstand, when our actions just don't fit with what we believe. But that's not enough to stop Jesus—not enough to stop him from forgiving us and calling us his beloved children; and not enough to stop him from sweeping us up, with this whole creation, into his great and eternal embrace of love. Thanks be to God. Amen