



Sermon for the 17th Sunday after Pentecost, Sept. 19, 2021

St. Luke's Episcopal Church, Coeur d'Alene The Rev. Glenda Empsall, Deacon

[Proverbs 31:10-31, Psalm 1, James 3:13-4:3, 7-8a, Mark 9:30-37](#)

Good and gracious God, thank you for the gift of your Word. As we think on these lessons, open our hearts and minds to hear, learn and inwardly digest them. Amen.

What do scholars say about the letter of James and the gospel of Mark?

The letter of James was written (very early) to the diaspora of persecuted Christians. His message to them was to choose the path of life and avoid the path of death. James believed that right behavior (works) was more impactful than lip-service.

The gospel according to Mark is the earliest gospel, and was source material for Matthew and Luke but it lacks their details. Mark portrays a very human Jesus with emphasis on Jesus' journey to the cross.

Mark's gospel paints a picture of a suffering Jesus, resolutely going to death on a cross. Yet even in his sadness, Jesus preached love and forgiveness. Jesus knew that the true kingdom was God's domination-free society. Jesus taught inclusion and acceptance of those on the fringes of the social order. He cared for those who, in the culture of that time were expendable -- the poor, the outcasts, the disabled, the demon-possessed, the tax collectors, the women and the children -- ALL are God's beloved.

Let us join Jesus on this journey: from Nazareth to the Jordan, crisscrossing the Sea of Galilee and meeting crowds along the shore and on the hillsides, calling his disciples, teaching in the synagogue at Capernaum, going home to Nazareth and visiting nearby villages, preaching, healing the lame, the blind and the deaf, casting out demons, and curing lepers. Jesus was on the move; Golan Heights, Bethsaida, Tyre, the region of the Decapolis, Caesarea Philippi, Judea beyond the Jordan, Jericho, Bethany, Gethsemane and finally to Jerusalem.

Everywhere Jesus went, he was confronted by argumentative Scribes and Pharisees who challenged him and tried to confound him. Their position, their wealth and their privilege was threatened by Jesus' teaching. Everywhere, Jesus was confronted by needy crowds who wanted, no – demanded – to be fed, to be healed, to be heard. Jesus stayed on-task. The blind received their sight, the lame could walk, lepers were cleansed, the deaf could hear, the dead were raised, and the poor had good news brought to them. Still there were doubters, even among Jesus' inner circle of followers.

Jesus foretold his death and resurrection three times each in Matthew, Mark and Luke. [and also in the gospel according to John, although it is not as plainly stated] Today's reading is the second proclamation recorded in Mark, but the disciples still don't understand and "were afraid to ask him." For a moment, I wondered why they were afraid to ask Jesus for clarification. Then I remembered the gospel reading last Sunday. Peter was in denial. He could

not imagine that the Messiah would be betrayed and killed. Jesus chastised Peter in front of the other disciples, "Get behind me, Satan!" Witnessing that rebuke would certainly put a damper on my inquisitiveness!

Nor would I be anxious to respond to Jesus' next question, "What were you arguing about on the way?" Of course the disciples did not want to answer Jesus. They know that he knows they were "arguing about who was the greatest." Maybe the disciples HAVE understood that Jesus would be betrayed and killed and are vying for position -- wondering who would take over after Jesus died -- each one self-aggrandizing, "I am the GREATEST!"

I appreciate how James' letter informs the gospel reading. James wrote, "... where there is envy and selfish ambition, there will also be disorder and wickedness of every kind... Those conflicts and disputes among you ... they come from ... cravings that are at war within you ... you covet something and cannot obtain it; so you engage in disputes and conflicts. ... You do not have, because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly..."

Peter did not ask wrongly, but he answered impulsively. Time and time again, Jesus demonstrated to everyone that he did not want to be King, and he repeated that in today's reading. "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all."

When children appear in the gospels, they convey an important message. In my world, children are precious. We agonize over their health and welfare. In those days, more than half of children born died of diseases and malnutrition before reaching puberty. They were among the expendables. Yet Jesus brought a little child into the circle. Maybe Jesus put a spotlight on a little child to remind the hearers that they also are children of God; or perhaps to reassure them that Jesus loves everyone, regardless of their status.

You know that I am partial to children and I did not want to speak from my bias. I went to WebMD to look at developmental milestones for children 4 to 5 years old. This is the age when a self-centered baby/toddler begins to understand that the world does not revolve around them [unless they are an only child]. They are starting to identify that other people have feelings. They are able to work through conflicts without hitting or biting. They enjoy playing with other children and pleasing their friends. Most of the time they share and take turns, understand and obey the rules of the game.

Over the next several weeks, we will learn more about the developmental stages of Jesus' disciples and we will also hear more about little children. "Jesus loves me this I know, for the Bible tells me so-oh. Little ones to him belong. They are weak but he is strong. Alleluia!"

Listen to the sermon preached to you by the flowers, the trees, the shrubs, the sky, and the whole world. Notice how they preach to you a sermon full of love, of praise to God, and how they invite you to glorify the sublimity of that sovereign Artist who has given them being." [Paul of the Cross, 3 January 1694 – 18 October 1775].