

9-26-21
Pentecost 18
Mark 9:38-50

Be at Peace

Those of you who know me know that singing is an important part of life for me. For about as long as I can remember, I've sung in the choir at church and usually sung with another group or two. We started some new music with the choir here last week, and we'd love to have some of you come and join us. Those of you who have never sung in a choir before probably have no idea how that music gets from dots and circles on a page to what you hear when the choir sings. Music seems to just come naturally to some folks. They can hear something once and sing it or play it. Most of the rest of us have to work a little harder. We have to learn our parts and then put them together with the other parts that others have learned.

Whether it's Deanna and the choir here or my other choir director and that group, there is one trick that almost all choir directors pull once in a while. We'll get there and there will be new music in our chair. Something we've never sung before. Sometimes, we start right at the beginning and see how it goes. We had a director at Montreat one summer who would give us a new piece and tell us to start, and he'd say, "I'll see you at the end. Good luck." We didn't usually make it all the way to the end before we had to stop and work on something for a while. That's why most directors pull that trick. Instead of starting at the beginning and hoping for the best, sometimes they'll start at the back. Or in the middle. Let's turn to the last page, they'll sometimes say.

It's usually one of two reasons they do that, I've learned. Sometimes the easy part is at the end, and we need to build a little confidence before we charge into the hard stuff at the front

and in the middle. So let's hear the easy stuff first and then go back to the other. Sometimes, it's just the opposite. The hard part comes at the end, so we might as well turn right over there and see how rough it's going to be. If we can master that part, those first seventeen pages will be a snap! So sometimes we spend a lot of time at the end, then go back to the start.

That's what I want us to do with this text from Mark this morning. You've heard the whole thing. Part of it probably made you chuckle. Another part of it might have confused you. Another part may have made you mad. But that last phrase helps to wrap it all in language we can bear: be at peace. Be at peace with one another.

We in the Church sometimes need to be reminded that the goal is always for us to be at peace with one another. Whatever is going on around us and among us. Whatever struggles we face. Whatever divisions might keep us at odds. Whatever we can't control about each other's behavior. The goal is always that we find our unity in Christ and that, in that unity, we carry his love and grace into the world.

I've been to Presbytery more times that I can count. To Synod almost as many, and to General Assembly more times than most people get there. And a Session meeting at least once a month for thirty-seven years adds up. In all those settings, sometimes we've lost sight of that being at peace business.

So I want to us to start there today. To remind ourselves at the outset that what Jesus wanted for his disciples then and what he wants for us, his disciples, today is for us to be at peace with him, with ourselves, and with one another. Apparently that was as big a struggle then as we can make it today. But that was always the goal. I'm not sure whether that's the hard part or the easy part of this lesson, whether we turn there first in order to be comforted or whether that peace is the hardest part of being faithful. Either way, that's what I want us to hear first. Be at peace. With one another. It can happen

With that assurance firmly before us, now let's look back and what made it necessary for Jesus to remind those friends of how important that is.

We've talked many times before about how important it is for us to get past our reverence and hero worship of the disciples. St. John and St. Peter and all the other saints who walked and talked with Jesus have their names plastered all over churches and hospitals and schools and all kinds of other institutions that mean a lot to our culture. We usually see them in art and in our mind's eyes with haloes around their heads. But on the day we encounter them with Jesus in Scripture today, they are just people like us, people trying to figure out what they're going to do with Jesus and the claim he had made on their lives. Last Sunday we heard those people like us act a lot like us when they argued about who would be big dog and who would be left on the porch when this kingdom Jesus kept talking about came to be. We saw Jesus attempt to correct their thinking by placing a child in their midst as a model. This, we discovered, in a culture where that didn't make any sense. But that's the way Jesus usually works. He turns our own thinking upside down and makes us think in ways we didn't know we could.

So, you might think these guys would be a little chastened, that they might sit back and listen for a while and let Jesus talk. You know how it goes when you've been harshly corrected, maybe by a teacher or a boss or parent. Whether you deserved it or not, you usually know it won't do much good to change their opinion of whatever you did or didn't do. Sometimes it's best to just take your lumps and be quiet until it all blows over.

The disciples apparently hadn't been chewed as many times as some of us have. Because the next thing out of their mouths is that whiney, silly-sounding thing that opens today's text. "Jesus, we saw someone casting out demons in your name and we tried to stop him because he wasn't one of us. Aren't you proud of us now, Jesus? We can't let just anybody be part of this, can we? Did we do good? Did we, huh?"

We've had so many different versions of that conversation since that day that we never seem to learn any more than they knew. Praise music or pipe organ? Preachers who roam all over the room or those who stay behind the pulpit? Decent and in order, Presbyterian liturgy led by a preacher in a robe or some guy in a Mr. Rogers' sweater or a polo with a church logo on it sitting on a stool with three guitars and a ukulele behind him?

Whichever side of those arguments we're on, we want Jesus to be on our side with us. As Coach Corso might say, "Not so fast!"

What those first disciples discovered, and what we can learn if we will, is that all those people and lots of others can be doing exactly what God called and equipped them to do and it's not necessary for one of us to be wrong so another of us can be right. So long as the music we sing, the prayers we pray, the sermons we preach—so long as everything we do is designed to lead people into the presence of Jesus, to help them know his love and let that love into their lives, there is room for all the different ways worship happens up and down Delaware Avenue and for ways that we haven't thought about yet. You know that I think the world would be a much more orderly place if all those other churches and all the people in them would come around to our way of doing things, but let me know how that works out for you if you're still holding onto that hope.

What I do find hopeful is that in another month or so, several of those churches up and down Delaware will feed people from downstairs in the Ewell Martin Room on Tuesday nights while it's cold outside. Because Covid will likely be around that long and longer, we'll be handing those meals out for people to take away from here to eat, but we'll serve that meal one week of November, December, January, and February and First Christian, the Episcopal Church, Centenary, and St. Al's will all feed those same folks when their week rolls around. Those people who have come to depend on those meals to warm not just their bellies, but their hearts won't much care who's turn it is on any given Tuesday, unless the cooks at the Episcopal Church are a lot better than we are, and we all know that can't be so! We won't

harangue those people about Calvin's theology or how long it's been since they received the Sacrament and who served it to them when they did. Those Tuesday night meals, whoever serves them, will be sacramental events for those people because they will find the very presence of Christ in them and be sustained by it. So it won't matter who offers not just a cup of cold water, but a carry out box of warm food and maybe at Thanksgiving and Christmas a little something extra. Together, the Christian community of downtown McComb will get past that for four months and take care of the people who pass by our church every day and wonder what goes on inside them. Maybe if we feed them long enough, they'll wander in and find out. Here, or one of those other places. It won't matter. When they have experienced enough of the love of Christ freely shared with them, then maybe they'll learn to trust us enough to help them bear the burdens they carry every day.

Something like that is what set Jesus off on that tirade that always make us more than a little uneasy. Whether the little ones he talks about—the ones he warns us about being obstacles instead of helps as they try to grow in faith—whether those are actual children like the one he used to teach his friends or whether they might be people who are new to this whole idea of being faithful or whether they might be people who are not powerful or influential but just trying to make it through life, people like us—whoever those little ones are, Jesus had some pretty big expectations of how we need to be caring for them. Some of those images he uses to talk about what could happen to us if we don't pay attention to his call to care for the little ones make us wonder if Peter the Apostle might have wandered away during that part of the conversation. It always seems to be Peter who speaks up and tries to have some control over what Jesus says and does. So we wonder why, somewhere between chopping off a hand that has offended or plucking out an eye that has seen something it shouldn't or lopping off a foot that has slipped off the straight and narrow path, just before that millstone is thrown around someone's neck, you wonder why Peter didn't speak up

and say, “OK, Jesus, we get it!” But they didn’t get it. Any more than we did. That’s why Jesus went to such great lengths to clean up their thinking. Where the worm never dies, and the fire that is never quenched are both powerful images of places that none of us want to go. That’s why we don’t talk about them much. But once in a while, even we need to clean up our thinking.

We had a man in our church in Florida who had been a high-ranking naval officer. He used to tell me that he depended on the church to give him a rudder correction almost every week. He came to church to have his thinking adjusted, his direction reoriented. And he always remembered that sometimes it takes a long time to turn a battleship around. I don’t know where he’s getting his rudder correction these days, but I suspect he is in Church somewhere this morning just like we are.

With all those hard things said—don’t worry about what someone else is doing, be accountable for your own efforts to grow the kingdom, and be careful about how you do that work among the least and the lost, with those hard things said, then Jesus says what matters most. Now be at peace. Stop striving for position or for power or for influence or for just plain old insisting on your own way. Be at peace with one another and trust me to guide you to where that peace will lead you. It may be some place you’ve never been before. It may be where you’ve been all along. But you will never find your way as long as you’re striving, as long as you’re insisting that someone has to be wrong so you can be right.

Be at peace. Once you have found that peace, then see if it doesn’t lead to where you really wanted to be all along. Amen.

Prayers of the People

Loving and eternally faithful God, we pause today to reflect on and to give thanks for the gift of life, to acknowledge before you and one another that we receive this gift by your grace and that the even greater gift is the gift of new life you offer us in Jesus Christ. Thank you, Loving God, for life, whatever it is right now.

In this morning's time of prayer, we pause to give thanks for the love of families that nurture and care for us. Some of us find those where they're supposed to be, and others of us are not so fortunate, but we manage to find families along the way to do with and for us what our own could or did not. We thank you for the support and encouragement we find in friends who know us and love us, sometimes in spite of what they know. Some of them are close enough to be lunch partners and golf buddies. Others are far away, but always in our hearts. We thank you for the strength and abilities you give us and then call forth to serve not our own needs, but your purpose and will. We thank you for this community where we live; even with its problems, it is home, and we have opportunities to work to make it more than it is. We thank you, too, for opportunities you place before us to give as we have received, to trust that you will continue to provide while we are faithful stewards of what you have provided already. We thank you for these and for thousand upon thousand of other blessings we each name before you in our hearts....

We also offer our prayers for the needs of others, and we commit ourselves to serve one another and to serve those around us we continue to be served by your care and protection. Our community, like many others, continues to be shaken by the ravages of this dreaded virus. Parents have died and left children. Teachers have died and left students. The numbers continue to stagger us, and the end appears to be further away instead of nearer. Help us to recognize our need to care for one another even if it means setting aside our precious individual liberty. We are in this together, and we must learn to care for and about one another or we will not like where we come out. We pray for all who are overwhelmed by the pressures of leadership, for all who are exhausted by navigating uncertainty and change, especially among those who resist anything they have not already known. We pray for all who are ill and for those who care for them. We pray for all who seek courage to move forward toward whatever lies ahead of them. We know that you call us to set out on a journey when we can't see the destination clearly.

Sometimes we travel paths we have not walked before.
Sometimes we encounter peril along the way. So we pray that you would give us faith to move forward with courage, not always knowing where we're going, but confident that you have our hand and that your love will always be our guide. Hear all these prayers today O God, and all the prayers we pray between now and when we pray together again, and hear us now as we pray as Jesus taught us to pray together when he said: Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory for ever and ever.
Amen.