

WHEN IT'S TIME TO STOP ARGUING AND TAKE ACTION

18 Pentecost – B September 23, 2018

Mark 9:30-37

Did you ever walk into a room and everyone suddenly stopped talking? In mid-sentence? That feeling of paranoia you get because you're sure they're talking about you? Or at least talking about something they don't want you to hear?

Yeah. That feeling. A little of what Jesus must have felt when he knew the disciples were arguing with each other, but tried to keep their conversation just out of earshot of Jesus.

When they got back Capernaum, and assembled in the house, Jesus asked them: "What were you arguing about on the way?" Our gospeller tells us: "...they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another who was the greatest." As Mark tells it, Jesus knew exactly what they were talking about. Even without divine power, it's not all that difficult to figure out what people are talking about when they're talking about you.

But in this case, the disciples' inability to comprehend Jesus' second prediction of his arrest, suffering and death and...what? He will rise again? What is that all about?

They didn't understand, and were afraid to ask, Mark tells us. Never mind that we just went through a scene like this a chapter earlier, where Peter spoke for the disciples confessing that Jesus was the Messiah, Jesus told the disciples to keep it to themselves, then made the first prediction about his arrest, suffering, and death. I'm sure Peter was most afraid, because, the last time around when he protested what Jesus was saying, Jesus rebuked him in return saying: "Get behind me, Satan!"

The disciples didn't understand, because they would not be able to comprehend the magnitude of what Jesus was saying until the rest of the story played itself out. They would not be able to see God's hand in all of this, and the long-term plan for humanity.

Maybe they thought the "suffering and death" was more figurative than literal. After all, he did say something about rising again. If he is the promised Messiah, he won't have to actually die, after all, will he? No, he will be in a place of glory. And, it sounds like they speculated that if there was going to be a place of glory, perhaps they would get swept up in that glory. After all, they've given up a lot. They've listened to Jesus and followed him and even got to help him as he taught and even healed people.

When actors win an Emmy for their performance, don't they thank all the people who helped them? The whole cast and crew makes money, and oftentimes, the best supporting actors are also recognized, nominated for an award, and perhaps they too will be winners. Yeah! That's the kind of recognition that the *best supporting disciples* wanted.

And so their argument, their "talking behind Jesus' back" wasn't as much about him as it was about them. What were *they* going to get out of all of this? And suddenly the words of the writer of the Epistle of James make sense: *You want something that you do not have* (or do not think you have) so you plot and scheme. Your insides are in turmoil: "Your cravings...are at war within you...." [James 4:1]

What's in it for me? Those are the words of the people who are trying to claw their way to the top, who frequently step on others in their quest for greatness. In our insecurity, we try to make

ourselves look great, to achieve our dreams, by belittling or stealing the dreams of others.

“He appears to have a negative self-image.” “She’s not a team player.” “Just look at the greedy #&*.” We see it in the workplace, and we see it in politics, and in cliques in schools, and sometimes in our own friends and even, if we dare to admit it, in ourselves.

When you have doubts, or lack confidence, or feel insecure, there’s a great desire to prove yourself worthy—to others, to God, to yourself. “God, help me from becoming my worst-possible self.” “Get behind me, Satan!” Maybe that’s why one of the hymn options for this week and these readings was: “Jesus loves me, this I know: for the Bible tells me so.” How often we need to remember!

If God loves us that much (and “the Bible tells us so”) perhaps that whole grace thing really means we don’t have to prove ourselves to God or to anyone. And we can simply live as people who are secure in their relationship with Jesus and focus our attention *outward* where the real work of the Gospel needs to be done.

Which is where we find ourselves a week after the storm, where the flooding continues to swallow communities and, in the midst of the hundreds of horrifying images burned into our memories, we also discover the unsung heroes, the ordinary people doing their jobs—and more, the people who’ve lost their homes but still share their food with the neighbor who has none, the church that sustained storm damage at one end of its building, while at the other end is mobilizing volunteers to reach out to those in the community who have nothing.

Nobody wants to go through these times of trial. Jesus prayed “...if you are willing, remove this cup from me...” [Luke 22:42]. The disciples argued about greatness rather than speak of vulnerability. And people in this part of the Outer Banks breathed a prayer of thanks that Hurricane Florence tracked further south.

But people of God have empathy. Their hearts break when others suffer. And they work together to redeem a tragic situation. Our lay leadership had barely settled back in after the storm, yet quickly determined that Emmanuel, spared from the worst of the storm, would begin the process of making the Good News real—first, by donating immediately to the relief effort; second, by telling the story of what’s happening and how we can continue to help. Third, and beyond that? *To be continued...* in the weeks and months to come. Amen.