

Why Are We Doing This?

October 7, 2018

Mark 9:14-32, Psalm 117

The First U.P. Church of Crafton Heights

Pastor Dave Carver

*To hear this sermon as preached in worship, please visit
<https://castyournet.files.wordpress.com/2018/10/sermon10-07-2018.mp3>*

My wife and I were traveling in a strange and wonderful place, and we'd seen and experienced many amazing things. We'd been told to be in a certain place for dinner, and that the meal would have many local flavors.



Our hosts were not kidding! We showed up and there were tables spread with all kinds of food! Every color of the rainbow, every point of the food pyramid – wow, it was delicious! After we'd eaten quite a bit, a bunch of people showed up and took all that food away... and brought in *more* food! Soups and breads and cheeses. We stepped up to the plate and dove in. When that was done, we sat back, exhausted... and they brought out plates of meat and fish and eggs... And later – you guessed it – dessert.

If we'd have known what was coming, we'd have paced ourselves better. In the interest of pacing, I am going to do my best to fly through one of my favorite passages in the gospel – there is a great deal to see here, but I want to make sure you have room for baptism and communion today, so hold on...



¹Jesus is coming down from the mountain of the Transfiguration and he finds his disciples engaged in an argument with the religious leaders. When he asks what the disagreement is about, they introduce him to a parent who is in great pain.

Look at what's happened here: a father who is

¹ *The Transfiguration*, Raffaello Sanzio (16th century)

experiencing tremendous distress comes to the followers of Jesus and makes them aware of his pain and his need. When he did this, someone at least attempted a response. Evidently, someone else took issue with the nature and content of that response, which prompted some defensiveness and hostility on the part of the first group. Before you know it, there's a big argument about who is *right* about how to respond to this pain. And the person in pain? The person with the problem? That person is excluded from the conversation, because it's now a contest to be right.

Until Jesus shows up and asks what's going on. At this point, the warring factions are silenced and the father speaks up. "It's my boy. He's in bad shape. I brought him here, but nobody seems to be able to do anything about it."

Now here's something: All my life, I've heard this passage and I've heard it read, "IF you can do anything, please help us..." But today, for the first time, it struck me that perhaps this is the cry of a desperate parent: "Oh, sweet Jesus – none of THESE knuckleheads can do anything... but if YOU can do anything, please help us..."

In Mark 8:29, Peter declares Jesus to be the Messiah. In Mark 9:7, the Divine Voice says, "This is my son – listen to him". Today, a father looking for someone – anyone – who can bring him boy some peace, looks at Jesus and says, "If YOU can..." And Jesus, secure in the truth to which his friend had pointed and his Father pronounced, says, "IF? There's no IF here..." And that leads to the heart-wrenching cry: "Lord, I believe! Help my unbelief!"

I know that I'm not the only person in this room who has voiced that same cry: Oh, Jesus, I want to be there. I want to be with you. I am with you. But not as I want to be.

And I wish I could talk for 15 minutes about that, but we've got a big old helping of worship in front of us, so I want to spend my remaining time talking about the end of this episode. After the

young man is restored, the disciples pull Jesus aside and say, “Hey, master, what’s the deal? Why couldn’t we do that?”



“This kind can come out only in prayer.” Jesus’ response implies that the disciples were not praying.

They were so busy being *disciples* – you know, planning meetings, setting up flow charts, printing up sign-in forms – that they didn’t have time to pray.

They were so busy being *right* – you know, defending their ideas and practices in front of those other people who were so clearly wrong – that they had neglected to bring themselves, and that boy, and his dad to God.

Do you hear what I’m saying, church?

Jesus confronts the disciples. He’s already given them great power and authority – and for some reason, they haven’t bothered to contemplate what it really meant. The followers of Jesus were so busy minding the religion shop that they failed to meet a person in the midst of great brokenness.

Are you with me on this, church?

“This kind can come out only in prayer.”

So far as I can tell, this is the first time in Mark’s Gospel that Jesus talks with his followers about prayer. He’s modeled it for them; he seems to assume that they’re acquainted with the concept; but here he mentions it.

In Mark, prayer is not a divine shopping list wherein we jot down a few things that would be really nice and then we sweet-talk God into giving them to us. In this Gospel, prayer is wrestling in the wilderness with the Evil One. Prayer is submitting the self to God over and over again and again, seeking to align my heart and will and intentions with those of the Holy One.

That distinction is important today because not only are we

praying, but we are engaging in the historic practices of the people of God: for the first time in years, we'll be sharing baptism and communion in the very same service.



communion?

Why do we do these things?
Why has the church spent so much time and energy talking about and engaging in prayer, baptism, and

Much of American Christianity would lead us to believe that prayer and the sacraments are all about bringing us the assurance and comfort we crave as we walk through this veil of toil and pain. They are insurance policies or pick-me-ups...

“I’d like to have my baby baptized, so, you know... just in case... well, in case something happens... and then he’ll make it to heaven.”

“I *love* communion because it makes me feel all special and warm inside – like I really do matter to someone.”

“Ooooh, I love to pray. If I didn’t have my morning quiet time, well, I wouldn’t be able to feel like Jesus was close to me.”

All right – let me be plain: I don’t have anything against going to heaven, feeling loved, and feeling close to God. But beloved know this: *that is not why we do any of these things!*

Work with me here. Who remembers? What is the theme of the Gospel of Mark?

The Kingdom of God is at hand! God is near! Look! Act like it matters!

If that’s the heart of the message; if that’s what Jesus is about – then why do we do these things? Prayer, baptism, and communion are practices that are helpful to the extent that they reveal the nearness of the Kingdom.

We'll have communion today – and we'll do so not as a nice ritual that allows us to remember that there's really something quite remarkable about us and this community, but so that we remember that we are a part of the body of Christ that is broken and cast into the world. Especially on this world-wide communion Sunday, we remember that the body of Christ is bigger than we can imagine! I know, I know, you'll get the plate from someone who looks like Erlina Mae or Matt Adler, but I'm telling you that the bread we share also belongs to the undocumented immigrant; to the believer who is holed up in hiding under an oppressive regime; to the person who has been used, abused, and disbelieved time and time again; to that one who is lost in a fog of mental illness and anguish. We do this not *just* with each other, but with the whole body of Christ from all times and all places.

We're going to sprinkle little Stella today and parade her around the room, not simply because her great-great grandparents were here before any of us, but because we need to confess that her identity does not come only or even primarily from her parents, grandparents, or any of us... It is given first and foremost in Jesus Christ. She needs to know – today and every day moving forward – that before she is a redhead, before she is a Democrat or a Republican or gay or straight or trans or cis or rich or poor – before she is anything at all – she is God's.

As are you.

As am I.

And prayer – the prayer we share this morning and the prayer in which you take part through the week – that is not your own personal little exercise that is designed to make you feel all Jesus-y and holier than you used to be. It is an exercise in which we participate to the end that the Kingdom of God might be revealed and our neighbor blessed. If my praying does not result in a life that points toward God's intentions and the encouragement of my neighbor, I must be doing it wrong.

To review: we pray so that our neighbor might be blessed. We share communion in order that we might remember who our neighbor is. And we celebrate baptism so that we never forget that the Kingdom of God is, in fact, God's idea, not mine. I am brought to it, helpless and vulnerable and sometimes screaming like nobody's business – and in the context of a communion-sharing, praying community, I'm equipped to grow into the kind of pray-er that blesses his neighbors. Thanks be to God! Amen.