

September 20, 2009

The Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 20b)

Mark 9:30-37

All Saints' Episcopal Church, Atlanta, Georgia

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Creating The Other

I'm getting to that age in life and in the church where I have known increasing numbers of our bishops before they were elected and consecrated as such. And each time I find myself reviewing whether or not that is something to which I might be called or which I might like to do. Thus far I have blessedly always come to my senses and remembered that however much I might think that fighting about sexuality at a Lambeth Conference might be something I would like, hauling around a dioceses day after day to put out fires and deal with embezzling treasurers or philandering clergy would not be my cup of tea given a choice. We are blessed with a good and godly bishop who appears to enjoy and thrive on much of the work and does it with compassion and good sense as best I can tell. I share this because there is a kind of inherent anxiety that comes with reaching an age in which retirement is closer than ordination and the reality of death closer than birth. I knew of contemporaries who died when I was a schoolboy, but I was into my forties before I lost a close personal friend. It is a reality for all of us that the horizon of death draws nearer to us as we get older. It can be that reality that leads us to a kind of anxious assessment as to how we are doing relative to others, comparisons with our friends and contemporaries and so on.

There was some research on development in the adult life cycle done in the seventies by a team at Yale under a man called Daniel J. Levinson¹ which suggests that this tendency to competitive comparison is slightly different for men than for women but that all of us are likely to be afflicted by it sooner or later.

Certainly Jesus' disciples were afflicted. He has no sooner made the first prediction of his own death at the hands of the authorities and had Peter try and talk him out of it,² when the disciples start comparing themselves with one another. On the way to Capernaum "they had argued with one another who was the greatest. And so the seeds are planted amongst them of the very human dynamic that has led to so many deaths including Jesus' own.

¹ Published as *Seasons of a Man's Life* (Ballantine, 1979) and *Seasons of a Woman's Life* (Ballantine 1997)

² Mark 8:31-33

It works like this. When there is tension for any reason in some relationship important to us, it becomes very threatening to live in and name that tension. In order to relieve that tension we do one of two things. We may try and draw someone into our relationship and put them in the middle, or we create a victim who appears to be extraneous to the relationship. How often have we seen two people get more and more focused on one or more of their children as whatever tension there is in their relationship becomes less and less tolerable. Many of us have done that to some degree. We can gain some sense of being together rather than in conflict when we have a common concern; especially one that is sanctioned by a society that likes to focus anxiously on children. (This is where many of our safety laws come from.)

If we don't try and draw others in then the other thing that we can do to manage that anxiety that comes from some deep sense of competition or envy or common desire for something that appears to be scarce, then what we do is create an outsider, someone to blame, someone to attack, someone who deserves to pay for our unhappiness and so on. Think of something as simple as when we both want the special that is being served by a restaurant and it turns out there is only one serving left for the evening. However we resolve the issue of who gets the special (and by the way sharing it is a pretty good solution) we might well find ourselves agreeing that really the restaurant isn't as good as everyone says it is. Blame the restaurant. That agreement feels pretty good to us.

Much more seriously we might be religious people who find ourselves at odds with the society around us as we feel less and less relevant to what is going on in the world. We have friends who seem to get along just fine without participating in church or we have governments that no longer feel that we are an important constituency that has to be taken into account in the politics of the day. We start bickering with each other and when that becomes intolerable, we start casting around for some common purpose that will give us some sense of togetherness. You know what the problem is really? It's doctors who perform abortions. It's gays. It's the gun lobby or the right wing. It's the government. It's the Muslims. It's socialism. When enough of us agree then we can feel pretty good and maybe not even notice that the price of our togetherness is someone else's death. Matthew Shepard lay dead on a little used road in Wyoming because someone thought it OK to kill the enemy who was gay. Jim Pouillon lay dead outside a high school in Michigan because someone thought it OK to kill an anti abortion protestor. Thousands lay dead in New York and Washington and Pennsylvania because it has somehow become OK to kill the enemy perceived as immoral. Jesus, just another victim, was crucified as the religious authorities dealt with their anxieties about Rome.

We are all involved, all implicated. None of us is without sin in this regard and the cycles just keep on going. What is the answer? Is there anything that can make a difference? Well, Jesus points to the answer in his being, his words and his actions. In his being he is an integrated self. He is not threatened by his disciples' competitiveness. He does not avoid them or chastise them. He stays

connected to them. In his words he tells them that the way to live fully and free, the way to be first in the Kingdom, is to be a servant. He does not say 'be servile'. He does not say 'avoid power'. He says 'be of service', 'add value', 'consider the needs of others and you will discover your own truest needs, hopes and desires.' And then in his action he takes a child (among the most vulnerable in any society) and puts it among the disciples and tells them that rather than creating victims, capitalizing on the vulnerabilities of others or seeking togetherness at the expense of others. We are to welcome those people, whoever they are and wherever we find them. In doing so we welcome him -- the One who died as a consequence of that anxiety which led us to sin.

Becoming an integrated person is partly a matter of practice: welcoming others, finding ways to serve, practicing generosity in every ways we can. It is partly a matter of allowing God to work in us that we may be ever more fully the person we were created to be. A key practice is choosing to gather around this table. Here we are confronted by those we victimize in many ways, who may well be quite literally across the table from us. At the same time we are offered transformation through forgiveness of sin by the victim of the cross.

I know this can sound pretty high-falutin'. But following Jesus in the way of life comes down to practices that help us watch out for those times when we find togetherness at the expense of others or when we find our selves feeling competitive in ways that could lead us to be untrue to our selves. It means not spending your waking hours with the one you love talking only about your children and it means not being seduced into seeking a role without wanting the reality that goes with it. It means finding ways to stay connected with those who are vulnerable and perhaps especially those whom you are inclined to despise. Do these things and you are not far from the Reign of God.

As ever, let us respond to the gospel in silence and in prayer...