

Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost – 2024

Jeremiah 11:18-20

James 3:13—4:10

Mark 9:30-37

How would you like it if someone who knew exactly what made you tick wrote a book about you? How would you like it if someone who knew you inside and out, who understood your selfish impulses, who could perceive your every motivation, decided that you were the perfect object for a story that would be released world-wide? Imagine playing poker against someone who could read your face, every twitch of your mouth, every movement of your eyes and by reading you could tell exactly what was in your hand. Imagine spending three years with the Son of God. Imagine walking with Him on sunny days and on dark, stormy days. Imagine knowing that He knew exactly what thoughts rattled around in your head, what worldly notions you clung to with uncommon zeal.

The disciples, the twelve disciples, the Lord's uniquely chosen followers have their lives plastered all over the most profound book that the world has ever known. It isn't all roses and cupcakes. Those twelve men are so relatable, so human, so picturesque in the minds of Christians. We read this book, the Holy Bible, and we become acquainted with them – on a delightfully personal level – truly acquainted. Jesus tells them that He is going to be killed. Jesus deliberately took them aside so that there would be no distractions. The Lord Christ wanted unfettered access to their hearts, their minds (Mark 9:30). He poured His teaching into them with great clarity, with zero ambiguity, and with unmistakable seriousness. "The Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men, and they will kill him. And when he is killed, after three days he will rise" (Mark 9:31). This wasn't the first time. The Lord had told them about His coming passion previously (Mark 8:31). That was the time that Peter came unglued and rebuked Jesus for His words (Mark 8:32). So the disciples have had some time to process this. And here's how Mark describes their reaction to this, Jesus' second passion prediction: "But they did not understand the saying, and were afraid to ask" (Mark 9:32).

What do you make of that? There's no way that St. Mark has this wrong. The disciples didn't understand the saying. It didn't register, didn't compute, they couldn't make sense of it. Really? I once saw a woman at the airport checking her luggage. It was a huge bag, a single bag, loaded to the hilt. It was overweight and the young lass either didn't have the money to pay or something like that and she was told to reduce. Immediately, and I mean immediately, she opened her bag, took out a bunch of who-knows-what and walked directly to the trash can. Maybe, it took 30 seconds. On another occasion, and I'm not making this up, I saw a young lass who was told that she had to consolidate two bags into one and she plopped down and stewed and fiddled and fell apart trying to make this work. Now maybe she had family heirlooms in that luggage. Or maybe it was just stuff. The disciples didn't understand what Jesus was talking about. When Jesus told them of His sacrifice, His death, His resurrection – they couldn't grasp it. Why do you think that is?

Here's a clue: "And they came to Capernaum. And when he [Jesus] was in the house he asked them, 'What were you discussing on the way?' But they kept silent, for on the way they had argued with one another about who was the greatest" (Mark 9:33-34). What was in the disciples'

luggage? What kind of worldly junk were they holding onto so fervently that they wouldn't ditch it? Jesus had just given them the priceless story of His life and they couldn't grasp it. Why? Because they were holding onto the vanity of the greatest being on top, the greatest being served by those beneath him, the greatest being covered in adulation and accolades and ticker-tape and rose petals and Cartier sunglasses and designer perfume and Tiffany bracelets. Don't you want to be the first girl? When Jesus gives you wisdom and love and truth don't you want to open the bag of your ideas and get rid of anything that runs contrary to His Word? Like in 30 seconds? Or do you want to be the girl who holds onto everything possible, struggle to maintain your worldly outlook while, perhaps, finding a way to fit Christ into it all?

“What were you discussing *on the way*?” But they kept silent, for *on the way* they had argued with one another about who was the greatest.” “On the way” is code. “On the way” is code for the path that we are on, the way of all disciples, walking with Christ. “On the way” is the road to the cross. “On the way” is the life of faith. Christ engages us “on the way.” We walk beside Him “on the way.” Jesus is the way (John 14:6). He opens our eyes by His Word “on the way” (Acts 9:17-18). Our hearts burn with His glory as He teaches us about Himself, about His sacrifice, about His life in us “on the way” (Luke 24:32). The disciples were talking about the world's garbage as though it was their priceless family heirloom “on the way.” It's alarmingly incongruent. Their hearts, their spirits were full of junk and because they were unwilling to part with it they couldn't grasp Jesus' teaching about His cross.

Ultimately, they would come face-to-face with it. There was no alternative but to look at it. Jesus was arrested and many of them fled. Peter denied knowing Him. It's not really about a girl having a melt-down in the airport because she had to part with something. It's about you and me; it's about the clutter that crowds out what is priceless, the clutter that crowds out what is eternal, what is divine. What are we talking about “on the way?” I came across a World War II photograph this week. The picture is of a bombed-out gothic church in Europe. Some of the church's walls are literally gone, but the altar is still standing, and the pastor is at the altar with his deacons and acolytes. I can't imagine their internal distress. But I can imagine their faith. I can imagine Christ's promises animating their hearts, their minds. Some of your brothers and sisters are going through very hard things presently. Having been in their company, I see them as the young lass who took no more than 30 seconds to discard whatever was superfluous. Jesus' death and resurrection are in their bag. That's what they're talking about “on the way.” That gives them great strength.

Christ was content to be lowly. The Great One became lowly, servant of all (Mark 9:35). There is no way that you can ignore this truth and grow as a Christian, grow in heart and mind and spirit. Jesus identifies Himself with children and their lowly stature, their lack of personal standing. Jesus took the lowest seat. Gladly, for you, He was crucified. The Great One was pierced, nailed to a cross to deliver you from sin and death. We carry around His death in our body. That's what it means to be baptized. Listen to this from 2 Corinthians: “We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies” (2 Corinthians 4:8-10). I visited one of your brothers yesterday in the hospital. Cancer; severe measures had to be taken to protect his life.

There was not a hint of defeat or self-pity or an accusing demeanor disguised as faithful questioning. There's no room for that sort of thing in His luggage, His heart, His soul.

Easter animates our brother. He carries the life of Christ in his body. Easter animates this holy house. Christ is risen. On the third day, I will rise. The disciples were there for that. Their lives are plastered all over the Bible for us to relate to, to learn from their missteps, to emulate their high water marks. One of them, when he saw the Lord's wounds, cried out "My Lord and my God" (John 20:28). That's the confession we carry around in our body. Christ the King – my Lord and my God. That's what we will talk about on the way. We will read, mark, learn and inwardly digest Jesus' teaching. We will luxuriate in the heavenly gifts that we have received. We will receive the lowly in His name (Mark 9:37). We will take the lowest seat and serve with the gifts He has given each of us and always defer to the Giver (Luke 14:10; 17:10). It is a joy to be walking in the way with you. We are in Christ's company and it is a joy to be with Him.