

**Lectionary 25B [Pr 20]  
Grace Lutheran Church  
Lakeland, FL  
September 19, 2021**

**Jeremiah 11:18-20  
Psalm 54  
James 3:13 – 4:3  
Mark 9: 30-37**

Grace to you and peace from God and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Please pray with me. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

A friend of mine is a home-schooling mom and a pastor. I learned that one day for homeschooling she and her children had a “Backwards Day.” So they got up and put their pajamas on – inside out, had pie ala mode and then lasagna for breakfast. They walked backwards to the car when it was time for grocery shopping. Mom did not drive to the store in reverse, however. Instead of coming in the front door when they got home, they came in the back door. They planned a supper menu of orange juice and pancakes. And as they got ready for bed, they put on their shorts and t-shirts. Backwards. Everything backwards.

And that’s how we live as disciples and followers of Jesus. Backwards and upside down.

As we have been considering discipleship these past several weeks, we have come to understand a few things. While membership has privileges, we, as disciples, as baptized children of God, have responsibilities. Through the waters of our baptism we have been called into a life active with the love of Jesus, not merely a passive observer sitting on the sidelines.

In the gospel readings we saw that Jesus healed people – even those “others”, those who were not among the “insiders,” those who were on the margins, those who are often overlooked and not seen. And as disciples we too have experienced healings of many different kinds – some physical, some emotional, some relational, and most certainly spiritual. Yet, we are not left there. No, we too are called to be healers ourselves – speaking words of peace, standing for those who are oppressed, doing small things with great love as Mother Teresa, now St. Teresa of Calcutta, said. But also not being afraid of the big things that we may be called to do.

Last Sunday we heard Peter’s confession in the Gospel of Mark of who Jesus is – the Messiah, the Anointed One and then we heard Jesus describe what that meant – that he would suffer, be rejected, be killed and rise again. That was something that the disciples were not understanding. They yearned for a Messiah who would restore Israel to its former stature as a great nation, admired by others. And this desire on their part obscured the reality of what Jesus was teaching them – a life of denying one’s very self to follow Jesus; to release one’s hold on one’s life for the sake of the gospel in order to have real life. That was the first of three predictions in the Gospel of Mark of what was waiting for Jesus as they are now traveling to Jerusalem for the last time.

And today’s Gospel reading is the second. Jesus is teaching them as they walk along the roads of Galilee – he is not just telling them or predicting for them. He is teaching them that this is what it means to follow him – that they will be rejected, suffer, die and be raised. So as this band of travelers walked along they undoubtedly split into smaller groups as they engaged in conversation and had different paces and perhaps were sidetracked along the way. Nonetheless, they reached their destination in Capernaum – perhaps Peter’s home or his mother-in-law’s house. They are all gathered around and Jesus says, “So, what were you talking about on the way?” And they were absolutely silent; no one – not even Peter – wanted to speak because they knew full well what they were talking about – who was most important? And, implicitly, who was least important. Who did Jesus love the most? Who would be in charge after Jesus died and before he rose again. What was the pecking order?

Don’t we wish that was unique to the disciples and followers of Jesus then? Alas, that is not the case.

I don't know if you may have watched Downton Abbey of recent years or Upstairs Downstairs back in the day. Downton Abbey was set in the early 1900's and it personified what it meant to know your place and that was especially clear among the staff of Downton Abbey. Mr. Carson, the butler, is chief of staff. Mrs. Hughes is the housekeeper and in charge of all things that the women servants do. Then comes Mr. Bates who is the personal valet to Lord Grantham and then Anna who is personal maid to Lady Mary. Then there is the head of the kitchen and then all those assisting her. And of course the under-butlers, the footservants and all the rest. Each one knowing their place. Knowing who is greater than whom and where they each rank in the pecking order.

But Jesus turns everything backwards and upside down, doesn't he. Whoever is to be great among us must be the servant of all. Oh, how we resist this – unless, that is, we want to make a show of our servanthood – then let us make sure that we do it better than anyone else and that all know of it. We are so human, aren't we.

The writer of James speaks of envy and selfish ambition, boastfulness, disorder among the things that impede the kingdom of God coming among us. And urges instead that there be purity, peacefulness, gentleness, a willingness to yield to another, mercy, the absence of hypocrisy. Those are to be the hallmarks of our life together. A life that doesn't get wrapped up in disputes and conflicts but instead a life that follows after Jesus as we suffer, are rejected, die knowing that we will rise again.

And the gospel-writer uses an important image to demonstrate what this upside down life looks like.

Right there in the middle of this circle of disciples gathered in this room in this home in this little fishing village, Jesus took into his arms a little child. And said, "whoever welcomes one like this, welcomes me."

Now, when Jesus referred to the child, there are two things he wasn't doing – first, he was not saying – have the faith of a child. That's a whole different text and a whole different context. Second, he wasn't saying – see this child – so sweet, so innocent, be kind to her.

Children in Jesus' time, especially Roman society were nearly invisible. Statistically, of 10 who were born, 3 would die in infancy, 2 more would die before the age of 6, and 3 would die before they reached the age of 16. That means that 2 survived into adulthood. Children were the weakest and most vulnerable in society – they were the first to be victims of famine and disease. They had no standing in their own right.

At the center of the circle today is Jesus' embrace of the one who is least important in the scheme of things – the one who is not noticed, the one who knows their place – and it's not among the greatest, the one who doesn't have a bright future, the one who may not have a future at all.

And this is what is so amazing about this story. And this is what I want you to remember. In the center of this circle of disciples, if there is room in Jesus' heart and arms to embrace this child, and if there is room in the circle of disciples for even those who didn't get it, and who were afraid, those who were full of themselves and wanted the best seat in the house, then my friends there is a place in Jesus' arms and in the circle of disciples for you and for me.

A perfect circle? No. But one into which we have been drawn through the waters of our baptism and in which we stand with each other as fellow disciples. Disciples with responsibilities. Disciples who are called to bring healing to others. Disciples who stand together, wet in the waters of our baptisms. Disciples who follow Jesus, the lover of our souls.

Thanks be to God.