

Virginia Synod ELCA

Sermon for Sept. 23, 2018 (18th Sunday after Pentecost – Lectionary 25B)

Jeremiah 11:18-20 - The prophet led like a lamb to slaughter

Psalms 54 - God is my helper; it is the Lord who sustains my life. (Ps. 54:4)

James 3:13--4:3, 7-8a - The wisdom from above

Mark 9:30-37 - Prediction of the passion

There is no one among us today or any day who has not gone through a very rough spot in life at some time or another – grief over a death or other loss, a mean-spirited attack that we didn't deserve, punishment for something that we maybe *did* deserve, uncertainty about the future, injury, frustration, you name it. If that is not your situation right now, bless you, and thanks be to God! But chances are you have been in that kind of painful circumstance sometime in the past, and chances are you know someone either here or elsewhere who is having a rough time. When that happens, our instinct as Christians is to try and find some word of hope and comfort for others or even for ourselves. But for those who experience pain, and wonder if it's all worth it, what can we say or do? What is our good news?

Our forebears in the faith, the wise saints who passed the Scriptures along to us, first intended for us to see that seasons of anguish are common to all people, including those whose trust is in God for all things. As today's lessons make clear, God's people are not immune! And so, because we share a common human experience with those who suffer, our call to follow Christ includes weeping with those who weep, working alongside those who are breaking out of poverty or disaster, genuinely sharing the pain of those who have been unjustly treated, and sticking with those who are suffering the consequences of their own wrongful choices. The cross of Christ itself shows God's relentless companionship with us in our own moments when we see no light and no end to the suffering. This amazing story – Jesus, crucified and risen – that is at the center of our life together as the church allows us to walk alongside really anyone, knowing that – as St. Paul says in Romans – there is nothing in all creation that can separate us from the love of God.

That is plenty of good news already, but take a look again at the example Jesus sets for us in today's gospel. If you want to talk about rough days, just imagine walking around knowing that you are the constant target of a death threat, and not only that, you know that there's nothing that will change it. This is what Jesus was experiencing.

Add to that that your group of best friends are completely freaked out when you tell them that your death is imminent. They are so freaked out that they can't even bring themselves to talk with you about it. So if you're Jesus, it's almost worse than being alone.

And that's not all! Their way of changing the subject when they don't want to discuss your death is that they start arguing about which one of them is the most important, which one is your best friend, which one should be making the big decisions.

So if you're Jesus, surely your instinct is going to be to tear into them with everything you've got, give them a serious talking-to, and maybe even dump the whole lot and get a fresh batch of disciples.

Of course, that is not what happens. Instead, Jesus seeks out a child, one who is vulnerable, innocent, powerless, and – like most children throughout history – unimportant and always in danger of being ignored or tossed aside. Jesus places that child in the middle of this group of people, each of whom thinks they should be the center of attention, and says – no – our way of being God's servants is to put ourselves second, third, fourth, last in importance behind those who are as unimportant as this child.

Why is this good news for us? After all, Christians have no exclusive right to compassion; lots of people who do not believe in God are capable of being compassionate and caring and can comfort those in grief; they also care for their children. But what really makes it possible for us to follow Jesus down this hard road, even under the worst of life's circumstances, is that we are actually never alone. We just imagined how alone he must have felt, but on the contrary, the very last thing he talks about in this passage is the one who sent him – his heavenly Father. "Whoever welcomes someone like this child welcomes me and, in turn, welcomes the one who sent me." The act of reaching out to someone small and seemingly insignificant is to welcome the presence of Jesus.

Jesus is able to promise something that only he can promise, that our lowest moments in life are still filled with the companionship of almighty God. If we forget that, our task is clear: we go find someone even more vulnerable and in pain and burdened than we ourselves are. In showing love and value to them, we find ourselves joined by Christ and by God's own presence. It is nearly impossible to explain to someone who has not experienced it, which maybe is why the story ends the way it does, with no response from the disciples.

And yet, surely this is why the Psalmist could say "Strangers have risen up against me, and the ruthless have sought my life, those who have no regard for God. But God is my helper; it is the Lord who sustains my life."

This is not some kind of self-help trickery, not bootstrap advice from someone who wants to blow sunshine in your face and tell you everything will be okay in spite of the facts. Of course, it is wonderful to get wise encouragement from those who have the long view when things seem to be closing in on us, but this – this promise from Jesus is a miracle. He brings us to the other side of death even before death has come and he opens our eyes to the presence of God in the smallest of things and the smallest of people.

When our darkest moments are upon us, we have the chance to trust a word of good news that the disciples found hard to understand, and in doing so, we find ourselves closer to Christ than his disciples thought was even possible.

In the name of Christ, Amen.