

Every Last One -- Pent+21B

First of all, I don't know your experience, but if the disciples had a clue or two that Jesus was closely related to God – if they had been paying attention to the events of Jesus' life, and if they had been paying attention during any of the prayer lessons Jesus was giving them they would have known better than to say to him "Teacher we want you to do whatever we ask of you." (I can still hear Bill Morley's voice saying that in our Mark read-through). All kinds of problems with that request: Like praying for your team to win, which means praying for the other team to lose. Why would God do that? Would you want a god that would do that? "How would you like to have a god that will make any team win anytime the prayer is offered?" "Oh no, hold the phone, I only meant MY prayers...!" But the disciples, these two especially, James and John haven't been paying attention. Why it was only in the last chapter that they were up on the mountain hearing the voice of God say, "This is my son, my beloved; listen to him." They heard it on the mountain, but by the time they got back to town, they had gotten it all mixed up, as in many a fairy tale.

One of the running themes in Mark's gospel is the perpetual spiritual slow-wittedness -- not to say stupidity – and self-involvement of the disciples. They don't seem to catch on too easily or remember too well the nature, power and intention of God, that Jesus tries to convey and with which Jesus is imbued. They haven't been paying attention, so what they do hear and see they tend to misapply. And let us not delude ourselves that Mark thinks his readers can benefit by the dim example of the disciples merely as a form of amusement. Mark wants his readers to know how difficult it can be to accept the grace of God, even though God is in our very midst. Mark wants us to know that we are more like the disciples than we are unlike

them. God wants us to know that it is not unforgivable to be like that – far from it – as long as we want to listen more closely, remember more fully, and change more deeply as our lives progress.

The old saw, “Be careful what you pray for, you just might get it,” did not become a proverb because it was ludicrous hyperbole, but because it is ironically, eye-openingly true. Now any prayer that includes all contingencies of the circumstances being addressed, in detail and order of importance: any prayer that describes ‘what all’ we want out of a given situation becomes a very long prayer indeed. So, like James and John, we go for the Hail Mary, so to speak: “Oh God, make everything right,” or we ask for a quick solution, the Quarterback Sneak, without any idea of what will come next: “God, just, just, just make me happy right now.” One can think of lots of absurd examples of how the former strategy inevitably disappoints, and how the latter strategy might backfire, but the thing to remember is: We don’t know where our present, immediate desires will lead. This is what Jesus tries to explain to his disciples: “You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?” They replied, “We are able.” But if they had seen the crucifixion -- Mark’s implied question hangs in the air – would they have been quite so eager and confident? May God bless and keep all martyrs to the ages of ages, but not too many of us want to be forced to choose whether or not to be martyred. Not me.

This prayer, attributed to the great thinker Reinhold Niebuhr (from Missouri!) shows attention paid to what Jesus is saying to his people, “God, give me grace to accept with serenity the things that cannot be changed, courage to change the things which should be changed, and the wisdom to

distinguish the one from the other, living one day at a time, enjoying one moment at a time, accepting hardship as a pathway to peace, taking, as Jesus did, this sinful world as it is, not as I would have it, trusting that you will make all things right, if I surrender to Your will, so that I may be reasonably happy in this life, and supremely happy with You forever in the next." Amen.

It doesn't say "awfully, very, or perfectly happy," it doesn't even say, "quite happy." It says, "reasonably happy." And the means of that reasonable happiness is recognized as being a better measure of wisdom, which will help us know where we might best be directing our energies. Our piece of the book of Job today sounds like a courtroom drama: Can I bind the chains of the Pleiades, or loose the cords of Orion? No. Can I lead forth the Mazzaroth (the secrets of the constellations) in their season? No, but Fulu can. Or guide the Bear with its children? Absolutely not. But do I know the ordinances of the heavens, and can I establish their rule on the earth? Well, I think the ordinances are those commandments, give or take, and yes, I guess I can start trying to establish them with me. "As for me and my household, we will serve the Lord." Prayer answered.

But instead, so often it is: "God! This is what I want, and now would be good." Usually we say please, which is nice, but we know full well it is God's plan and purpose to be with us in our defeats, neither to cause nor to prevent them. Jesus won't even let himself address who will sit at his right and his left forever in glory, much less who will and won't suffer disaster in this brief life of ours. If we want to test this theory, we can try going to the Emergency Room some night and telling a bereaved mother that her child's death is God's will.

I once had a job at the JFK Library in Dorchester, Massachusetts, minding the various video loops in the

museum. So, about 50 or 60 times a day I heard those distinctive tones from 1962: "There is always inequity in life. Some men are killed in a war and some men are wounded, and some men never leave the country. Some men are stationed in the Antarctic and some are stationed in San Francisco. It's very hard to assure complete equality. Life is unfair." What Mark's Jesus is saying is that life is fair actually, or was before human beings started making it unfair. And our lives are best spent trying to make it fair again. There is a clear formula for doing this, which Mark has Jesus offer immediately -- he's got the folks in a teaching moment here: "Whoever wishes to become truly great among you must be your servant; whoever wishes to be first among you must be servant of all. The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many." The way for Jesus is the way for us.

We conveniently and understandably forget it when disasters unfold and we utter our foxhole prayers, but what God offers is cosmic insight, spiritual companionship, and an emotional frame of reference for this life of mortality and enterprise, suffering and joy, loneliness and love. God is not offering EMS Services, cannot be called in to strike others or to extract us from their clutches. God offers instead, perhaps we can say PHH, a Permanent Heart's Home. As Inayat Khan has said, "By loving, forgiving, and serving, it is possible for your whole life to become one single vision of the sublime beauty of God." God's pursuit of our spiritual companionship is what led to the pure miracle of Jesus, who appeared so we might be ever more fully aware that we are always of, with, and in God: every first, last and middling one of us.