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Church of the Ascension, Chicago, IL  
Proper 20B, September 19, 2021  
Mark 9:30-37

Whenever I have a hard time getting into a piece of scripture, I attempt to retell it to myself as a story. I imagine all the “characters” who are mentioned, and I fill in the spaces and faces that aren’t described in the text: who was in the crowd gathered around Jesus, which disciples Jesus was talking to, what the scenery looked like while Jesus performed a miracle.

This practice of mine is not exactly an original technique for reading and engaging with our holy text. I learned it from a mentor, who likely learned it from one of her own mentors. The Jesuits have been teaching the faithful for hundreds of years how to imagine themselves in the presence of Jesus. And entire novels have been written, devoted to the “filling in” of scripture.

Indeed, this is the same concept behind films exploring Biblical stories. Some are period pieces and require costumes of sandals and robes and film sets in sandy landscapes. *The Ten Commandments*, starring Charlton Heston comes to mind.

My personal favorite of the genre, Passolini’s *The Gospel According to St. Matthew*, doesn’t just imagine the world of Matthew’s gospel but nods to a long tradition of scripture-inspired art, specifically painting and music, in a sort of metanarrative that mines that gospel for meaning.

In fact, it’s not even set in the Holy Land, but in the Italian countryside, and the fixtures of the gospel are not portrayed by stars, but by non-professional actors: students, poets, a philosopher. Passolini even cast his own mother as Mary, the mother of Jesus. Interestingly, the director “filled in” the visuals of the narrative, but chose to stick exactly to the gospel text for the dialogue.

Preparing my sermon for today, I have to admit, I had a hard time getting into the texts we just heard. And so, I turned to this technique, and I began to write a story.

My story started with the disciples walking along a dusty road through Galilee to Capernaum, muttering and arguing amongst themselves. Andrew and John with their arms crossed and mouths scowled, Simon making comments about how Jesus called him his favorite, quietly under his breath, though not so quietly that the others couldn’t hear him. Hence the crossed arms and scowling faces of Andrew and John.

I tried to imagine the house where the travelers gathered once they got to Capernaum. How big was it? Big enough for more than 12 people to rest from the journey. Were there trees around it? To offer shade from the unyielding afternoon sun?

Then, I wondered who it was that Jesus asked about the arguing, and finally settled on Andrew and John because he’d certainly have presumed Andrew and John to fess up about what their brothers, Simon and James and were on about.

I pictured an exasperated Jesus, sighing into the silence they offered when he asked them about the arguing, and how the look on his face would have immediately loosed their tongues.

I imagined Jesus then calling the twelve, each by name, to sit with him around a fire while others in the house mingled or busied themselves with preparing a meal. Maybe he stood up and whispered something to one of the mothers who was minding the group of children who'd also been traveling with Jesus and the disciples. He took the small child that had been resting on her hip, and she was relieved to no longer have to hold her cup of wine out of reach of the babe. To be able to have a conversation with the other women who had gathered to discuss Jesus that strange thing Jesus had said while they passed through Galilee. The thing about the Son of Man and betrayal and human hands and rising again after three days.

But then, I got stuck. Because no matter how many times I read the words, I just heard the same old thing.

The same message that Jesus seems to keep coming back to throughout the gospels, whether beatitudes or parables.

That same old message, painted in the bright and astonishing hues of miraculous healings and dead raisings.

That same old message, illustrated in delicate strokes of small and sometimes missing though hinted at details: In the Kingdom of heaven, the first shall be the last.

"Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all."

The *first* shall be the *last*.

That same old message. Or so I thought.

Because then, I think the Holy Spirit, that Great Disruptor, disrupted my thoughts, my seeking for the meaning of this deceptively simple text or at least for something meaningful to share with you today.

Four words floated into my consciousness:

*Stop striving so hard.*

And then I sensed that familiar, warmth of ease and recalled those words which sounded from heaven at Jesus' baptism: *You are my beloved. With you I am well pleased.*

I probably could have set this gospel passage in 2021 and made the disciples lawyers, day traders, managers of nonprofits, not in robes but button up shirts and ties. That home they gathered in, could have a 3-bedroom, second floor walk up in a Brownstone in Lincoln Park.

Because I realized these disciples, with their arguing about who was the greatest, aren't so unlike us.

They, too, strived to be seen as worthy, to be recognized as good at their jobs. They too strived for approval of their ministry, their work, their lives.

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So Jesus walked around the room, gathered the twelve calling each by name. He asked them to sit with him. And then he said to them, looking each disciple in the eye:

“This isn’t about who is the best. Who is the most revered, the most celebrated, the most loved.

I already love you. The one who sent me, already loves you.

You are my *beloved*. With you, I am well pleased.

And I also call this child, beloved. And I also call her mother, beloved. And I also call the lepers, beloved. And I also call the poor, beloved.”

Jesus said all this, knowing that he would go all the way to the cross because of it. And that he would rise after three days. Because the love of God overcomes everything. *Even death*.

So do as the Father has done in Son: Humble yourselves. *Stop striving so hard*. Instead, seek and serve the hungry and the poor. Seek and serve the cast outs and the refugees, the tired and the weary, the aging and very young. Seek and serve all those whose lives that this world has said don’t matter.

Because the message that Jesus tells us again and again and again, is that the world *is wrong*.

I imagine Jesus holding the child’s hand in his, squatting so as to be at eye level with her. He would have smiled and the child would have smiled back, knowing deeply as small children are so blessedly capable, the love of this man Jesus.

By this point, most of the disciples had turned their own eyes to their feet.

Jesus turned again to them and said, “Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.”

Each one of you is one such child. My prayer for you and for me, is that we live in that knowledge, live capable as children as knowing that we PAUSE are the beloved children of God.

And knowing that to be beloved of God, calls us to a life of service to one other, not just within this faithful community, but especially outside of it. Especially all of those who have been told and are being told that they are anything but fellow, blessed children of God.