

Sermon for 22 September 2024 @ Bethesda UMC/Baltimore

Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Scriptures: Proverbs 31:10-31; Psalter: 738 Psalm 1 (*Response 2*); James 3:13-4:3, 7-8a;_Mark 9:30-37

Sermon

How hard it is to be satisfied with powerlessness!

Last week I told you one of my very earliest memories was of resting in my mother's lap after some unremembered conflict with her ... maybe just my agreeing to get ready for bed, and being rewarded by a quiet rocking and watching the car lights go by through the bedroom window down our fairly busy street.

I believe I've shared with you that practically all my adult life I've had some kind of counselor or therapist helping me reflect on things. Yesterday I was reminded of something my latest advisor reminded me: That all we really have is the present. Everything else is speculation: Our memory, as we well know, plays tricks on us, and we think differently about things as we grow and age; and tomorrow is, despite all our predictions and preparations, totally out of our knowing and managing. Bible commentator Fred Craddock reminds us that the Gospel writer Mark is particularly focused on Jesus' crucifixion. That stood out in last Sunday's reading of the Gospel, and also again in today's. In both lessons Jesus is flatly telling the disciples it's coming. Last Sunday St. Peter rebuked him: "You can't talk like that! You're the Messiah!" (I'm putting scripture into my words here, of course): but Mark has Jesus literally snap back, "Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things."

Today Mark just says "they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him." Then we have that acute perception on Jesus' part, "when he was in the house" (in other words, not on the road to Capernaum, but inside, in a moment of privacy, "he asked them, 'What were you arguing about on the way?' But they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another who was the greatest."

I can't do better than read it again. Do it with me, together: He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, 'Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.' Then he took a little child and put it among them, and taking it in his arms he said to them, 'Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.'

This past week has been kind of heavy for me. Unexpected expenses, nightly rehearsals, and what Methodists do every year, writing reports for church conference, which for me get harder and harder because they're on computer and all terms and symbols. It got to Friday afternoon and I was just more ready for a nap in a hammock than doing anything productive. I found myself out in what we used to call "Robert E. Lee Park," out Falls Road, just walking, trying to

calm down and make sense of it all, and that thought about nothing mattering but what's here and now came to me, and I sort of relaxed a bit. I've always tried to understand things, get to the root of them, think what other people are saying and what happened to me yesterday or long ago ... and it just relieved me to feel that what really mattered was not understanding everything, but handling what was going on here and now and I calmed down a bit.

Proverbs, and James, and a little while back, the Song of Solomon and Psalm 19 .. and then all this heavy talk about getting it right and yet giving it all up ... we've got direction, and doing right matters lots ... but really, God is the ruler yet! The least powerful part of our identity, the smallest part of our journey, is the sum of it all, isn't it?

We belong here. Now is the truth we need to see, and the way we need to do. Encouragement is around us, and within us, here, and the rest is where it belongs... where the Maker is in total control.

How ever you say that, that's your gift to yourself, and the rest of us.

In Jesus' name, live that.

Thanks be to God.

In his arms, let us say, amen.