

Time after Pentecost – Lectionary 25
The Reverend Nancy R. Easton

Sunday, September 20, 2009
Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

Jeremiah 11:18-20; Psalm 54;
James 3:13 - 4:3, 7-8a; Mark 9:30-37

To the Cherub Choir [at the 8:15 service]:

Good morning! Thank you for being here. I just read a story, and I wanted to say something to you before I enter the pulpit and begin my sermon. The story was about how Jesus learned how His best friends were busy bragging to each other about which one of them was his best, best friend. They were busy bragging about how great they were, and they were busy talking about all those things among themselves, and they weren't listening to Jesus when He was trying to teach them. So Jesus said to them, you've got it all wrong. The greatness really comes when you think someone else is more important than you, so you care for them, and you help them, and you love them. And then He took a child in His arms, perhaps a child that might have been smaller than you, but a child young like you, and He said, "Whoever welcomes and loves this child, that's the same as welcoming and loving me!"

Do you know who usually sits in these seats on a Sunday morning? The adult Chancel Choir –grownups, people my age, sometimes older – people who have sung for a lot longer than you have, and they sing really, really long songs. But I'm glad you're here, because it reminds all of us that it doesn't matter your age, and it doesn't matter your size, and it doesn't matter the length of the song you sing, or how long you've been singing – we're all here to show God how much we love Him, and we're all here to receive His love in return. Thank you for being here. God loves you very much, and that's exactly what today's Gospel story is all about.

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

In my first English course in college, this lowly freshman sat in a room full of upperclassmen, digesting literature. I don't recall what we were studying, but something prompted our professor, Dr. Schroeder, to ask out of the blue: "Who is a great American artist?" I looked around. No upperclassman seemed willing to give an answer, so I raised my hand. Dr. Schroeder acknowledged me, and I said confidently, "Norman Rockwell!" (I still stand by that answer.) My memory of the event is that Dr. Schroeder went ballistic: "No! Norman Rockwell is not an artist! He is an *illustrator*," said Schroeder, his pronunciation of the word "illustrator," dripping with disdain. He turned his gaze from me to the other students in the room: "Can anyone here name a great American artist?"

I don't remember what happened after that, because I was busy being embarrassed. I should have said "Andrew Wyeth." I should have said "James Whistler." I should have said "Frederic Remington." I should have kept my mouth shut, is what I *should* have done. Silence would have been better.

Apparently that's what the disciples think here, as well. Yes the noise you hear in our Gospel story today, is the deafening silence of the disciples before Jesus. Note, they do not comment on Jesus' prediction of His suffering, death, and resurrection. Mark says the disciples actually don't understand, even though this was not the first time Jesus has made this prediction to them. Mark says the disciples did not understand, and they were afraid to ask.

Well no wonder! In last week's Gospel lesson from the previous chapter in Mark, Jesus asks His disciples, "Who do you say that I am?" It is the disciple Peter who raises his hand, who pipes up, "You are the Messiah." The rest of the disciples are like the folks in *Family Feud* (Good answer, Peter, good answer!). Except that Jesus then goes on to define what it actually means to be the Messiah, and that's the lesson where we read Jesus' first prediction of His suffering and His death and His resurrection, and Peter decides to respond to *that* information, as well. He decides to rebuke Jesus for indicating that the hoped-for Messiah of the Jewish people, the anointed one of God, would have to die.

Now I'm not saying that what happened after that is that Jesus went ballistic, but His rebuke of Peter, in return, was as strong a rebuke as a person could get. "Get behind me, Satan" he said to Peter – do you recall that from last week? – "you're setting your mind on human things, not on divine things . . ." Ouch! No wonder in today's lesson, the disciples say nary a word in response to Jesus' second prediction of His suffering and His death and His resurrection. Silence is golden in this case.

There is an interesting second silence in this lesson, and it speaks volumes, too. Jesus casually asks the disciples what they were talking about on the way to Capernaum – actually what they were arguing about. But they were reluctant to answer Jesus' question, because they know that what they were arguing about on the way to Capernaum was wrong all the way around. While Jesus had been speaking about self-giving, they're busy discussing things that were self-serving, so they keep mum. Yet in spite of their silence, in spite of the fact that they did not answer, Jesus knows; Jesus knows that on the road to Capernaum they were arguing with one another about which of them was the greatest.

I think their second silence helps us understand their first silence. They don't wish for Jesus to rebuke them (as He did Peter), because that would be embarrassing. Their honor is at stake; their reputations are at stake here. In fact, just prior to his lesson, in chapter 9, the disciples failed in a task. They had been asked by someone to exorcize a demon from a little boy, and they couldn't do it. As hard as they tried, they could not do it. Boy were their faces red! So, already embarrassed in front of the demanding crowd, and already embarrassed that Jesus could heal the boy when, with all their might, they couldn't, they will not risk being embarrassed again, having their honor besmirched, not in front of one another or worse yet, in front of Jesus, Himself. Admit they didn't understand Jesus' predictions the second time around? Admit they were only half listening to Jesus' teachings on the way to Capernaum, because they were too busy ranking themselves on the social status ladder? No, this moment calls for silence – even Peter zips his lips.

But though they are silent, Jesus knows. He knows their weaknesses. He knows their failures. And He begins then, with great patience and a perfect visual aid, to teach them, once more. Jesus reminds them that if they really want to be first, if they really want to be great, they must be last of all, and servant of all. Greatness is to be found in lowliness, and in humility, and in service. And then He picks up in His arms a child. He brings a child, someone off at the margins, on the periphery of their interest and concern, brings that child front and center, holds that child in His arms, and tells them that whoever welcomes a little child like this, welcomes Him. And whoever welcomes Jesus, welcomes the One who sent Jesus to the world to redeem creation in the first place.

This is radical teaching. In Jesus' day, children, while loved by their families, were not valued the way we value children today. They were valued only for the fact that, with a little bit of luck, they would actually grow into adulthood, survive into adulthood, and maybe become economically valuable to their aging parents. Children in Jesus' day were on a par with the servants of the household. And in terms of where they stood in society's overall power structure, they were insignificant, they were invisible. So for Jesus to suggest that when a disciple accepts someone that insignificant, it's the same thing as if they are accepting Jesus the Messiah were shocking words.

Believe me, the disciples' discussion on the way to Capernaum did not revolve around which one of them was the most *insignificant* – that's not what they were clamoring to become, or where they perceived greatness to be found, or the Messiah to be found, for that matter. For them, greatness was to be found in fame, and in power, and in the accolades and affirmation of the crowds. That's where they wanted to be. That's where they wanted the Messiah to be, too. But Jesus said, loud and clear, that's not where you'll find Him but that, rather, you will find Him among the least famous and powerful, the most invisible and insignificant. And when Jesus said that, He was turning the disciples' concept of greatness, and the whole popular Jewish concept of the Messiah, upside down. Jesus said the disciples would become great only as they renounce their social status, and that once they become last of all and servant of all, they in turn are to welcome others who have no social status, and in so doing, they will welcome Jesus; they will, in fact, be doing the great work of Jesus, which always consists of reaching out to the people at the margins, on the periphery, those most needy, and those least visible.

Red Davis understood what greatness is in the kingdom. Red Davis died in 2004, but his congregation remembers him as a faithful servant, and he stands great in their hearts. The writer and preacher Gordon Atkinson, knew Red Davis. Atkinson grew up in the congregation where Davis was an elder member. And as he tells the story about Red, Atkinson says, "Red Davis was nobody special in this world, or he was a great saint. I guess it all depends on how you look at things. But I'll tell you something true and wonderful – 'nobody special' and 'great saint' go together a lot more often than most people think."

So who was Red Davis? Red Davis had been the CEO of a very large company in Texas. The company was well-known; it had stimulated the economy in that part of Texas, so Red Davis was a familiar man in those parts. When he retired as CEO back in the late 1970's, he got his gold watch, and he had his big retirement celebration, and then he went to his pastor and told him he wanted to serve the Lord. Now a man like Red Davis, with all those credentials, would have

been perfect on the finance committee. Or maybe the building program, because he was so well known and connected, and could have been very influential with other people. His name would be noticed, and people would listen to him.

But Red Davis had read in the church newsletter that there was an opening for a teacher in the three- and four-year-old Sunday school class, and he thought he'd like to do that. So the famous CEO, who used to sit in a leather executive chair, now sat on a carpet square on a linoleum floor in the Sunday school room. He admitted he didn't know a lot about teaching young children, but he was kind and warm and willing, and he was gentle and patient and generous. And for 25 years, Red Davis taught that class. Now when Red Davis would go to a congregational meeting and stand up to speak, people would listen to him. Not because he had been a CEO, but because he was that nice gentleman who taught their children in Sunday school. And when Red Davis died, a story was told about a young child who had once spied him in an aisle of a grocery store. The child turned to his mother, and said, "Momma, I just saw God!"

I was thinking about this story about Red Davis, and then looking at our Gospel lesson, and I think the opposite probably occurred. I betcha every Sunday morning when Red Davis went into that Sunday school room, and looked at those children I'll bet he said to himself, "I see God."

And if the sheer beauty and wonder of discovering how our Lord chooses to dwell among the most lowly and the most needy and the least visible, if that doesn't move us to silence and awe, I don't know what will. And then after the silence, and after the awe, we will take up His call to serve, and will do it with joy.

Amen.