

Jon Hauerwas – “First” – September 23, 2018
James 3:13-17 and Mark 9:30-37

When I was in high school, my father once referenced a song from 1972 called “The Class of ‘57.” The lyrics are a sometimes nostalgic, sometimes bittersweet look at what became of a fictional high school graduating class from 15 years earlier. Some of the paths traveled involve professional success, as students grow up to become teachers, and factory workers, and grocery store owners. One plays the organ at a Presbyterian Church. Another becomes prosperous as the owner of a huge cattle ranch. ¹

For others, tragedy strikes. One classmate ends up in a mental institution. Another commits suicide after his wife leaves him for a wealthier partner. And the group has completely lost track of Mavis. Where she “wound up is anybody’s bet,” they sing. ²

The chorus says, “and the class of ’57 had its dreams. We all thought we’d change the world with our great works and deeds. Or maybe we thought the world would change to fit our needs.” The lyrics proclaim the lofty dreams of youth, while providing some much-needed perspective about the challenging world of adult

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Class_of_%2757. Accessed September 23, 2018.

² *Ibid.*

responsibility. Yes. Some of our dreams will be realized, while others will not. The human journey is complicated and nuanced.³

Even so, I imagine that most of us who have gathered for worship this day like to believe that God has some sort of plan for our lives. This is not to say that God is controlling our every motion. We do believe in free will. But, for many of us, there is a nagging feeling that there is more to our existence than personal struggle, or professional accomplishment, or reproduction. We want to believe that God is with us, that God is guiding us, and that God will bless us.

Often, we envision the seemingly obvious signs of God's blessing. These may include good health, or good fortune, or high esteem. It is a powerfully existential moment when we realize that our perception may not be what God really intends for our lives. This point is well illustrated by our gospel lesson this morning. In it, Jesus says "The Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him, and three days after being killed, he will rise again."

Now, 2,000 years later, we understand that Jesus was speaking about himself, and his own crucifixion and resurrection. But, we have the benefit of hindsight which

³ *ibid.*

was lacking for the disciples. Thus, the text says rather bluntly that “they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him.”

For many people, and especially for the young, death is frightening. That’s because death holds the seemingly ultimate power to thwart the hopes and dreams that we spoke about earlier. Unless one is focused upon heavenly grandeur rather than earthly success, then few topics are more unwelcomed than death.

The disciples were somewhat unique in this regard. To follow Jesus, they had first left behind careers, and homes, and families. On the road, they adopted a minimalist, semi-nomadic life, traveling from town to town and from home to home. Naturally, they began to ask, likely first in quiet moments to themselves and then aloud, “for what purpose are we doing these things?” “If we’re not going to become prosperous in the here and now, then there must be some heavenly reward, right?” And, being the ambitious young men that they were, they began to argue with one another along the way about who among them was the greatest.

We do this, too, don’t we? Not always so overtly. But, we still have a thousand little ways of comparing ourselves to others. We quickly learn who the most attractive classmates are, and who among us is the most athletic. The valedictorian

gives a speech from the podium following a demonstration of academic prowess. Later, we compare job titles, and zip codes, and school districts, and spouses in an effort to determine who among us is the greatest.

But, Jesus challenges the wayward disciples. “He sat down,” indicating the posture of a teacher in ancient times. He “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.’”

You may have noticed the new language on the front of our worship bulletin. The words found there are deeply theological and they are in keeping with Jesus’ own teachings regarding children. The message here is that we are called to provide a place of welcome for all, even at the risk of distraction or interruption.

Bruce Epperly demonstrates this understanding in a recent article highlighting his own creative process. Noting that he often goes into his own world for a few hours each morning to focus on writing projects and sermon preparation, Epperly

writes, “I work best in solitude, so I begin my writer’s day around 4:30 a.m.”⁴ “The other morning,” he continues, “my five-year-old grandson, who was spending the night with us, decided to get up early, too. When he came down the stairs, I was initially a bit annoyed, though I hid my feelings.”⁵

“He knew that I was working, but after playing for a few minutes with his action figures, he said, ‘Grandpa, can you play with me?’ For a moment, I felt conflicted. I was on a writer’s roll, and the words were flowing. But then I looked into his eyes, and I knew that my brilliant insights could wait. So I entered the world of superheroes and sea creatures, reminded that the best theology is embodied in our everyday relationships. Greatness is measured by a child’s smile, not a felicitous phrase.”⁶

“Seemingly oblivious to their teacher’s lesson, the disciples appear to believe that greatness involves being set apart from their peers in power and adulation.”⁷ But, “Jesus identifies greatness with service and empathy. Those who are great are

⁴ Bruce Epperly, “Reflections on the Lectionary,” *Christian Century*. August 29, 2018. Pg. 19.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 19.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 19.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 19.

willing to sacrifice for a greater good than their own self-interest. True greatness involves humility and the willingness to serve rather than be served.”⁸

It’s now been 20 years since I graduated from high school. In that time, my personal ambitions have changed dramatically. So, too, has my metrics for judging success. I like to think that I now align my hopes and dreams with what scholars might call Christian vocation. Or, to borrow a line from Frederick Buechner, “your vocation in life is where your greatest joy meets the world’s greatest need.”

May it be so and all thanks be to God. Amen.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 19.