

Sept. 16, 2018

Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost, with Baptism of Emma Rose Hendron

Chapel of the Resurrection

Preacher: Rev. James A. Wetzstein, University Pastor

A reading from James:

Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers and sisters, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness, for all of us make many mistakes. Anyone who makes no mistakes in speaking is perfect, able to keep the whole body in check with a bridle. If we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we guide their whole bodies. Or, look at ships, though they are so large that it takes strong winds to guide one, yet they are guided by a very strong rudder wherever the will of the pilot directs. So also, the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great exploits. How great a forest is set ablaze by a small fire, and the tongue is a fire. The tongue is placed among our members as a world of iniquity. It stains the whole body, sets on fire the cycle of nature, and is itself set on fire by hell. For every species of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed, and has been tamed, by the human species. But no one can tame the tongue, a restless evil, full of deadly poison. With it, we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse those who are made in the likeness of God. From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this ought not to be so. Does a spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and brackish water? Can a fig tree, my brothers and sisters, yield olives? Or a grapevine, figs? No more can saltwater yield fresh.

The word of the Lord.

The Holy Gospel according to Mark:

Jesus went on with his disciples to the village of Caesarea Philippi and on the way, he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that I am?" They answered him, "John the Baptist. And others, Elijah. And still others, one of the prophets". And Jesus asked them, "But who do you say that I am?" Peter answered him, "You are the Messiah". And he sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him. Then, he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering and be rejected by the elders, chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed and after three days rise again. He said all this quite openly, and Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, "Get behind me Satan, for you are setting your mind not on divine things, but on human things". And he called the crowd with his disciples and said to them, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves, take up their cross, and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake and for the sake of the gospel will save it. For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his father with the holy angels.

The gospel of the Lord.

These readings this morning, especially the second two, call to my mind that it is such a blessing when someone loves us enough to correct us. It's not fun to be corrected, it's not pleasant, and we usually don't love it in the moment, but it is a blessing. To be brought back to the truth, to be reoriented to a path, well, it's hard because it requires the suspension of our own ego. The acceptance that we've made an error in judgement, missed a sudden critical piece of information, or weren't seeing clearly. It's hard, because that experience of being corrected seems to erode our own sense of value. We would rather be right and be known for being right.

So for someone to engage with us and bear with us a little while, while we go through the process of hearing what they are saying to us, denying their perspective, coming to terms with the fact that they might be right and we might be wrong, dealing with our own sense of embarrassment and shame, and then finally coming to terms with the reality or our place in it, all the while risking our anger or rejection because it's entirely possible that we won't take their advice, well, that's a big investment. That's a big risk. It requires a relationship of love and trust. Is it any wonder then, that the frequently the dynamic is like, "someone should say something to her" when all that plagues her is a little piece of spinach stuck in her teeth. How much harder is it for us to talk to one another about important things? And the fact that a relationship of trust has to be present for those kinds of exchanges to occur is reflected in the fact that when someone does come to us, frequently our response to them is "who does he think he is?" Mainly, "who is he to me that we should be involved in this conversation?" Now it's true that correction, or perhaps more accurately accusation of error, doesn't always come from a good place. Sometimes people point out our errors to belittle us, or to make themselves look better while we look worse by comparison.

But that's not what's going on in today's gospel reading between Jesus and Peter. Jesus doesn't operate in a way that depends on Peter's failure in order for Jesus to feel better about himself. Nor is Jesus simply angry with Peter because Peter, in spite of briefly having the right answer, "You are the Christ", misses out on the implications of this identity of Jesus. No, Jesus is actually concerned for Peter, and for all of the people who are around Peter listening to this exchange. We can see that in the fact that Jesus then goes on in front of everybody and engages the question. Having called Peter out, Jesus then goes back to the whole group to engage the whole issue of cross-bearing. Not only must Jesus take up his cross and suffer, this way of the cross is their path as well. Jesus loves them enough that he is actively working to get them back on track. He sticks with it until they get it. Except that if you read ahead in the gospel of Mark, and accept what most biblical scholars will tell you is the correct shorter ending, (there's a longer ending in your Bible that kind of wraps things up like a neat epilogue, kind of like the neat "where are they now?" at the end of the biopic), most biblical scholars suggest that that's not actually part of the original gospel of Mark. It's not in the best and oldest manuscripts. If you read to the end of Mark you discover that the men run from the crucifixion in fear, unable to bear the defeat, and the women run from the tomb in fear, unable to bear the news of the victory. Only in the other three gospels and the rest of the new testament, and the fact that you and I are here this morning, provides evidence that this confrontation between Jesus and Peter yields the result that Jesus was working for.

So rather than focus on whether or not Peter is right or wrong, and how Peter misses the boat, let's focus our attention on Jesus this morning, because it's always best to focus on Jesus. At this point I'm going to do a little bit of Bible study, and if you've got a Bible with you, or your Bible on your phone, feel free to take it out, because we've got just a little bit of the eighth chapter of Mark here, and the eighth through the tenth chapters of Mark kind of do this big hinge piece in the gospel of Mark. And it all has to do with whether or not you are on the right track, that's one metaphor. And the other metaphor is are you seeing what's going on and really getting it. The first part of Mark, up until the eighth chapter is an introduction to Jesus. We see Jesus teaching and healing and a community gathering around Jesus. Then, at the beginning of the eighth chapter of Mark we've got the miracle of the feeding of the 4,000, where Jesus takes the seven loaves of bread that the disciples have access to, feeds 4,000 men and women and children, and then the disciples gather seven baskets of leftovers. The abundance in Jesus' presence is so great. Everything seems to be clear. And then the disciples are with Jesus in a boat, and one of them says to the rest of them, "We forgot bread." And they start talking about the fact that they don't have adequate provisions for the journey. And Jesus catches wind of this

conversation and he's like "What are you talking about the bread for? How many people were fed with the five loaves and two fish?" And they say, "5,000". "And how much leftovers did you have?". And they say, "twelve baskets". And then Jesus says, "How many people were fed with the seven loaves?" And they say, "4,000". "And how many baskets of leftovers did you have?" And they say, "7". And Jesus says, "Don't you get it?" We're never told exactly what Jesus is on about. Like is the "getting it" the "you forgot to bring the leftovers getting it," or is the "getting it" the "don't you get that everywhere I go there will be abundance" getting it? It remains unclear. We don't see what there is to get, in spite of the fact that we saw everything happen and counted the baskets.

Then, in Bethsaida, Jesus has an encounter with a man who is blind, and Jesus heals him of his blindness. Except that when Jesus touches the man with the spit and the mud, Jesus can get a little earthy, and says to the man "How's that?", the man says, "I see people but they look like trees walking around". And so Jesus says, "Let's try that one again." What? The power of creation doesn't get it right the first time? You can be in the presence of Jesus and the miracles of Jesus and not see clearly?

And then comes this question on the way, and Peter has the right answer. He says, "You are the Messiah, the Chosen One of God. You are the Anointed One to bring the rule and reign of God in creation. I see who you are." And so Jesus starts talking about what that means. That the way that they're on is the way to Jerusalem, and Peter won't hear it. He denies the possibility that the Messiah is the one who has to be offered up in the greatest expression of a self-emptying God ever. In a way that will change the course of human history. Peter can't see it. He sees Jesus for who he is but he can't see. And so Jesus offers correction because Jesus loves Peter and Peter's associates, and they all need to be led back on the path, the path that is the way of life and salvation. They need to follow the path with Jesus. They need to see the path in order to walk the path and so Jesus talks to them. And then we get the rest of chapter nine where Jesus is teaching about the nature of the path.

And then we get to chapter ten and Jesus, as he's been teaching and walking along the path that leads to Jerusalem, is confronted by another blind man. So we've got a blind man at the front of the story and a blind man at the back of the story. This one we know his name. His name is Bartimaeus, the son of Timaeus. And he's calling out to Jesus, and Jesus says to Bartimaeus's associates "Bring him here". And then he says to Bartimaeus, this cracks me up, he says to Bartimaeus, "What do you want me to do for you?" Duh. And Bartimaeus says, "I want to be able to see". This has been the desire all along, since the eighth chapter. Jesus, I see you but I don't see. Jesus I want to see, and Jesus says to Bartimaeus, "It is for you as you have longed for. Your faith has saved you". And the gospel continues that Bartimaeus, now seeing clearly, follows Jesus on the way. Because he can see the path.

And then you know what happens next? Palm Sunday. Palm Sunday, where everybody welcomes Jesus into Jerusalem as the son of David who has come to bring the rule and reign of God among them. And Jesus knows how the week is going to end, because that's the path. That's the path. It's the way to the cross, and it's only in the cross that Jesus will be able to completely unite with the fallen humanity and bring resolution and restoration to our every need. And we will come to see that for ourselves. But occasionally, we get blinded by other priorities.

This morning we're going to mark Emma Rose with the cross of Christ. She's going to be washed in the water of her baptism, she's going to be made a daughter, and heir, of God, and God's rule and reign for all eternity. And that is going to be absolutely clear. We're going to see

it happen. And then, if life goes for Emma Rose as it goes for the rest of us, somewhere along the line, maybe when she's like 14, she'll be all stressed out about who she is and whether or not she fits in and what she's valued as, and her parents will try to reassure her with their love, but it's the identity that Jesus brings that will finally bring restoration. Not only for Emma Rose, for all of us. So that's why we place the font at the entrance to this space. When we get up for the baptism you all are going to have to get up and move around if you want to see for yourself.

We put it at the entrance to this space so on your way in here you can get reoriented to the path, reconnected with your own baptismal identity, recognize who you are and whose you are, and where your power of your life lies. Because there's all kinds of other identities out there competing for our attention. And the general idea is that a life well-lived is some kind of balance sheet. We try to accumulate for ourselves as many blessings as we possibly can, and minimize the hassles and the pain and the suffering. And so the question is, how are you doing in the balance? But sisters and brothers, in this place, around this table, hearing this word, we are brought back to the way of the cross, which announces to us absolutely clearly, so that everyone can see and hear, that you belong to God, and that your life has been sealed in the death and resurrection of Jesus, and that's where your value lies. That's who you are. That's whose you are. Even on the days when you can't see clearly.

The Lord Jesus, by the power of the Spirit, sees you clearly and will not give up. On you, on me, on this body.

In the name of Jesus.
Amen.