

Sermon for Proper 20B

August 16, 2015

St. Mark's Episcopal Church (Alexandria, Va.)

Mark 9:30-37

Crossing Boundaries for Life

Have you ever felt that you've been pushed to the outside? Held outside of a group? Or shunned some way? I know many of us can think about different times when this was true. For me, I went to private elementary school and then joined a magnet program in middle school where I was bussed to another side of town. To an underprivileged side of town where folks didn't really look like me. I struggled to fit in.

I think all of us, at one time or another, have been pushed to the outside. Or, to make it a verb, we've been "outsided." The new students are at seminary, and one of our my classmates is a single dad from New York City. His son, Justin, is a great kid. He plays football with us, and has been wonderful with my two boys. But I learned this week that for the first few days of school, Justin ate alone in the lunchroom. Here is this great kid, and probably just because he is new, he was outsided.

All of us, at one time or another, have been the person pushed out. And, all of us, at one time or another, probably have been the one to push others out as well.

That's what I want to look at today, especially coming out of our Gospel lesson. Think about what we just read... Jesus has his disciples with him, and they are on the road to Jerusalem. And three times in the Gospel of Mark, Jesus is going to tell his followers what is going to happen in Jerusalem. This is the second time. The Son of Man must be delivered into the hands of men, and he is going to be killed, and Jesus is explaining what is going to happen.

And the disciples simply don't get it. Maybe it's because he's done so much speaking in parables, and they are gun-shy about trying to figure it out, but they just don't get it. I think the reason probably is that what Jesus is talking about is so completely and utterly unexpected. Their image of a

messiah is of a political ruler, someone who is going to dominate and throw out the ruling parties. The idea that the messiah could come and be killed is just so unimaginable to them that they can't even begin to think about it. They simply don't get it.

And if you want to know just how badly they don't get it, they are hanging around while Jesus is talking about this, and they are arguing among themselves about who is the greatest. And Jesus confronts them, and calls them out, and there is complete silence. They knew that this wasn't the right conversation to be having.

And Jesus, maybe like a good parent, realizes he has a teaching moment. So, he goes in to full Rabbi mode, brings them in, and teaches. "If you want to be great, this is how you do it. The first must be last. If you want to be great, you have to be servant of all." And then he makes it an object lesson. He takes a child. And in that society, even more than now, children are powerless. He brings the child in, embraces the child, and says "whoever receives one like this, in my name, receives me. And whoever receives me, receives the one who sent me."

New Testament scholar Raymond Brown says that this is the inclusion of God exemplified. That one who is powerless was embraced in this way by the God who is power.

I want to pause there and just really think about that. We're going to talk about inclusion, and the beginning place is to think about the opposite. Often we exclude people, but why do we do that? We do it, I think, because we view people as different than us. And we somehow want to have power and protection and our own acceptance. So oftentimes we'll draw lines and keep people from encroaching in our group. We do this in many ways. We see categories of people pushed outside the lines because of age, race, ethnicity, gender, orientation, theology, or some other marker puts them on the outside.

I wish...I really, really wish, that I could stand up and say that this happens only out there. That this never happens in the church. But of course I would lose all credibility with you, because that just

simply isn't true. The church, sometimes unwittingly and sometimes intentionally, pushes people to the outside. Some times, in the past, it was because someone wasn't dressed the right way. Or they didn't like the right music, or wasn't educated, or any number of ways that this happens.

That is not the way the Kingdom is supposed to work.

In Jesus, we see the fullness of God's kingdom. We see how God's kingdom has begun to appear, and it's near. And we see all the change taking place. We see the story today with the powerless child, and hear that this is how the Kingdom of God works.

We see Jesus, who is always getting in trouble with the establishment, because he is reaching across boundaries and doing things he isn't supposed to do. There's the Samaritan woman at the well, and Jesus talks to her. There's tax collectors, and Jesus dines with them. To me one of the most pointed examples of it is when Jesus is anointed for death. On the way to Jerusalem, he has this moment where a woman comes in, and everyone in town knows who she is. She is a notorious sinner. And she comes in to the house where Jesus is having dinner, and she washes his feet with her tears and anoints them with perfume and dries them with her hair. And the religious leaders are in the corner, saying "Jesus is no big prophet...if he only knew who it was at his feet."

One of my professors at VTS has great definition of the mission of God: Mission is crossing boundaries for life. And we constantly see Jesus crossing all these boundaries, reaching out, and that is the way the Kingdom of God works. He is embracing the outsider and calling us to do the same.

So how do we, as a community, practice this more? At the end of the day it comes down to us drawing on God's love and grace, and making it visible in the world. We've got to go out and practice it.

I want to leave you guys with a story about Henri Nouwen. He was a Catholic priest, and a great scholar. He taught at Notre Dame, and Yale, and Harvard, and he wrote tons and tons of books. He's been dead nearly two decades and it seems he's still publishing books.

He had this great resume, but in the last part of his life he served as chaplain for this community of people in Ontario that had great mental challenges. There was a gentleman there whose name was Trevor. After Trevor had been there a while, they made the decision that Trevor needed to go to a psychiatric hospital. So off he went.

And after a while, Henri Nouwen felt the Holy Spirit telling him he needed to visit Trevor. So, Nouwen called up the hospital and he says he'd like to visit one of their patients, Trevor. There's a pause, and after a while they ask, "are you *the* Henri Nouwen...the one that writes the books?" Yeah, that's me. So they call him back and say hey, is there any way that you'd be willing to give an address at lunch to the faculty, staff physicians, and clergy. And he said yes, he would. So he arrived to the hospital and they took him to this room, called the Gold Room, for the presentation and he said, "where's Trevor." And they said, well you can see him later. This is just for the faculty and clergy and such. Nouwen was normally very mild and meek, but he said in that moment he felt the Holy Spirit impressing on him. He told them the main point of his trip that day was to see Trevor. And they said patients and staff are not allowed to have lunch together, and no patient has ever had lunch in this room. And again, nudged by the Holy Spirit, Nouwen says "well then I won't eat here either." They arranged for Trevor to join him. So Henri is busy eating, with some guy on his left and Trevor on his right, and all of a sudden Trevor stands up. There's this awkward moment, and Trevor grabs his glass of Coke and says "um, excuse me, I'd like to make a toast." All these M.D.'s and Ph.D's are looking at him, and Trevor says "if you're happy and you know it raise your glass..." And it starts out like that. He does it a few more times, and Henri Nouwen joins in. And then everyone else joins in this great chorus: "if you're happy and you know it raise your glass."

When that event was over, I'm sure that nobody remembers the words that Henri Nouwen said. What they remember is that Henri Nouwen made a choice to be welcoming. They remember that Henri Nouwen insisted that Trevor be there.

We need to be a community of love, and welcome everyone to come and to learn and to follow. We need to be the community that opens the door to Christ's love. But we also need to be the community that opens the doors so we can take Christ's love to the world. To the hurting, the marginalized, and the outsider. We need to be the community that crosses boundaries for life.

That is the way the Kingdom of God is supposed to work.

Amen.