

Fear and Faith  
Rev. Frank Allen  
First Presbyterian Church of Kissimmee

September 20, 2015

Mark 9:30-37

They went on from there and passed through Galilee. He did not want anyone to know it; <sup>31</sup> for he was teaching his disciples, saying to them, “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.” <sup>32</sup> But they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him.

<sup>33</sup> Then they came to Capernaum; and when he was in the house he asked them, “What were you arguing about on the way?” <sup>34</sup> But they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another who was the greatest. <sup>35</sup> He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, “Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.” <sup>36</sup> Then he took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms, he said to them, <sup>37</sup> “Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.”

## HARD OF HEARING

Last week we talked about the first prediction of Jesus’ suffering, death and resurrection. In that passage we learned that Jesus told anyone who would listen about the approaching storm.

Jesus was on the way to Jerusalem.

And in Jerusalem he would find rejection, suffering, a cross and at the end a resurrection.

Peter understood it or at least he understood enough to know that he didn’t like the sound of it one little bit. So, he forcefully tried to talk Jesus out of it.

But, Jesus turned his back on Peter; called him “Satan,” and told everyone who would listen that if they were going to follow him they would have to take up their own cross and follow him.

According to Jesus, the kingdom of God was not about power and success.

The kingdom of God was about self-denial and service.

After that Jesus took Peter, James and John up to the top of a high mountain. On that mountain this inner circle of disciples saw Jesus in all his glory. And he was talking with the two greatest figures in the history of God's people, Moses and Elijah.

The disciples, of course were overwhelmed by the vision and Peter even suggests that they just stay up there forever. But, then the cloud of God's presence overshadowed them, and the disciples fell flat on their face.

A voice from the cloud said, "This is my Son whom I love. Listen to him!"

You would think that a voice from heaven would do the trick for the disciples. But, when the message is one that we don't want to hear, quite often we don't (as the Bible puts it) have "ears to hear." Our ability to hear and understand is affected by fear.

## NO QUESTIONS

In our lesson for today Jesus once again predicts the crucifixion and the resurrection. He knew that this second prediction of his Passion would trouble the disciples.

So Jesus made sure that the second time he brought this up would be a private time, just Jesus and his disciples. It would be a time when the disciples could ask any question without worrying about how it would be perceived by the crowds.

But, in this case the disciples do not reject what Jesus says (as they did in last week's lesson), nor do they accept it. They just keep quiet.

Teachers know what this is like. "Any questions?" And all you see are the dull stares of those who have no clue. Then you know that its time to go over the lesson again.

But in this case the reason for the disciple's lack of understanding is different from students who haven't studied. The Bible tells us that they "did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him."

Maybe they couldn't understand because they were afraid.

Jesus was saying something that they didn't want to hear, and their fear kept them from processing the information.

This phrase translated "they did not understand what he was saying" can also be translated "they ignored what he was saying." When disciples don't like what Jesus is saying they just don't listen. Even a voice from heaven is not enough to change that.

That's still true.

Sometimes really smart people make the wrong choice because they are afraid.

Fear stokes the fires of prejudice.

Fear keeps us from seeing new possibilities.

Fear prevents us from asking honest questions because we are worried about what the answer might be.

But, worst of all, fear keeps us from having faith.

You may think that the opposite of faith is doubt.

That's not true. In fact I believe honest doubt can actually lead to faith.

## FAITH AND FEAR

No, the opposite of faith ... is fear.

We see this theme throughout Mark's gospel.

Fear and faith are often paired together as opposites.

For example, even after Jesus stills the storm the disciples are still terrified.

And Jesus asks them, "Why are you afraid? Have you no faith?" (Mark 4:40)

Jesus' statement to Jairus about his dead daughter is similar, "Do not fear, only believe." (Mark 5:36)

In Mark faith is not intellectual assent to certain ideas.

Faith is much harder than that.

Faith is having hope and displaying courage in the face of impossible odds.

Faith is trusting in the grace of God as revealed in Jesus in the face of danger and death.

The disciples will continue to struggle with this.

In chapter 10 of Mark's gospel, Jesus makes a third prediction of his death and resurrection and once again the response of the disciples is the same. They are afraid. As we might put it: they don't want to go there. (Mark 10:32-34)

It would be easy for us to criticize those first disciples and condemn their lack of faith.

But, Mark did not write his gospel just so that we could second guess decisions made by people long ago. Mark wrote his gospel so that we might confront the fears in our own life.

### FEARFUL QUESTIONS TODAY

We may pretend that we don't have hard questions for Jesus, but we do.

For example:

Why do good people suffer?

Why are humans so brutal to each other?

Why does evil succeed?

And we still ask the same question that the disciples asked,

Why did God's Son have to die on a cross?

Wouldn't it be better for God to defeat evil in a more direct way, to establish his kingdom through force of arms?

Those are questions that we would rather not ask because we know that the answers are hard to come by. Maybe it would be better if the preacher would just be quiet and talk about more positive things. Right?

But, Jesus will not allow us to skip those questions.

Indeed, those hard questions lie at the heart of the Christian faith.

And until we ask and answer those questions we will find it hard to understand and follow Jesus.

The disciples could not follow Jesus because fear clouded their hearts and minds.

Isn't the same thing true of us?

Aren't our lives often paralyzed and distorted by the power of fear. There are many who successfully manipulate us by preying upon our fears.

## OUR FEARS ARE LEGION

In order to really understand Jesus, we too have to become aware of how fears distort our own perception. The Bible tells us of a time when Jesus healed a man called Legion. He was called Legion because his demons were legion, his fears were many.

And the same is true for us.  
Our fears are legion, our fears are many.

What are your fears?  
Can you name them?

Are you afraid of being alone?  
Are you afraid of losing a loved one?  
Are you are afraid of a relationship ending?  
Do you have anxiety about your health?

Some of those fears are mine, and I know that some of those fears are yours as well.

## OVERCOMING FEAR THROUGH STRENGTH

Fear has a way of stripping life of joy.  
Fear has a way of making it difficult to wisely use the gifts that God has given us.

What can we do when our fears are many?

Some suggest that the answer is to make ourselves strong.  
We must make sure that what we fear doesn't happen to us. We need to be on the winning team.

That's what the disciples believed.

Jesus had just told them for the second time that his way was the way of self-sacrifice and what do they do?

They have a debate behind his back about who is the greatest. They want the prize jobs in the new administration when Jesus becomes Messiah and takes over the country.

We can imagine their argument.

Perhaps one thought that he had a higher ranking because he controlled the group's finances.

Another claimed that he had a higher ranking because he had a more compelling religious experience having been one of the few who witnessed the Transfiguration of Jesus on the mountaintop.

Maybe others talked about how much they had given up so that they could follow Jesus. Surely they deserved a higher rank in the coming kingdom.

They were afraid to ask Jesus any questions about the cross.

But, they were not afraid to jockey for political position behind his back. They were not afraid to claim that they were the greatest.

This all sounds very modern.  
It's football season and the political season.  
Those two things seem to go together don't they?

Guess what people are arguing about?  
Who's the greatest?  
Who's number one?

What's wrong with winning?

The world loves winners.  
We never get tired of winning.  
Right?

That's what some would tell us.

We quote the famous coach over and over again,

“Winning isn't everything; its the only thing.”

Is that true?  
Is winning the only thing?

Or could our striving be just another reflection of a deep insecurity?

Sometimes people are successful because their fears drive them to work relentlessly.

And sometimes that causes them to fail in the ways that are most important.

## A NEW MINDSET

Jesus sits down (that means he's in teacher mode), and he tells his disciples,

“Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.”

Now I'm sure the disciples were puzzled by this as well. The word used for servant is the Greek word for slave. Who willingly chooses to be a slave?

Sometimes what Jesus says seems as strange as strawberry pizza!

But, Jesus tells us that in order to overcome our fears and follow him, we need to redefine what it means to win. In a world filled with fear we need a new mindset.

Paul wrote that we should not be conformed to this world. Instead we should be transformed by the renewing of our minds.

Jesus enables us to do that. Jesus enables us to leave our fears behind and discern the will of God. (Romans 12:2)

In our lesson for today, the disciples argue with each other over who's the greatest. They squabble over petty issues of rank and status.

But, the more important questions are totally ignored. Sadly, we know this pattern all too well in the church.

I wonder.

How would this story have been different if the disciples had found the courage to ask their hard questions?

And how would our stories be different if we found the courage to ask Jesus our hard questions?

I think our life together would be transformed.

## OVERCOMING THE SILENCE

Jesus confronted his disciples about their debate on the road. He asks, “What were you guys arguing about on the way?”

And what did they say?  
Absolutely nothing.  
The silence was deafening.

You parents know this game. When the kids get real quiet in response to your question, there’s trouble brewing. “What were you doing? (Long silence) Oh nothing.”

Sometimes we’re too quiet.

We are afraid to name our fears.  
We are afraid to admit our mistakes.  
We are afraid to ask the hard questions because we might not like the answer that we get.

We strive harder and harder to be successful but we fail to appreciate what we already have.

Faith begins by finding the courage to ask those hard questions in the presence of Jesus.  
We need to hear not just what we want to hear from Jesus but also those things that challenge us deeply.

The way of Jesus is still the way of the cross.  
The way of Jesus is still the way of selfless service.

But, that difficult journey can begin with just the smallest step.

Jesus responds to our fear by giving us an invitation to have faith.

## FAITH AND ACTION

Now don’t misunderstand.

This invitation to faith is not just an invitation to believe certain things about God.

Doctrine alone cannot overcome our fears.

In fact, sometimes doctrine alone can even be a way to express our fears.

For Jesus faith begins with action.

Faith is taking that first step toward the kingdom of God despite our fear.

Faith is doing even a small thing as an expression of our trust in God's promises.

How small a thing can that be? Pretty small.

Jesus gives an example.

He takes a child and puts his arms around that child in love. And then Jesus says,

“Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.”

Do you want to be great?

Put your arms around a child.

Welcome the “little ones” into your life.

In our day that sounds pretty easy.

Who doesn't love the little children? Right?

But, we need to know how that sounded in Jesus' day.

In his day the best thing you could say about childhood was that you would grow out of it.

In a world where everyone lived near the edge of extinction, children did not contribute to the survival of the family. Children in many ways represented the lowest rung of society.

But, Jesus said that the answer to our fears is to embrace these little ones. How we treat those who are most vulnerable is a sign of faith.

That's what his kingdom is all about.

Once again Jesus overturns what society believes about power and security.

The abundant life doesn't come from lifting ourselves up.

The abundant life comes from stooping down and putting our arms around those who are most vulnerable.

The abundant life does not come through winning all the trophies. The abundant life comes through service.

The abundant life doesn't come by collecting powerful friends. The abundant life comes by welcoming children.

Jesus does ask us to take up a cross and follow him.  
But, Jesus lets us start small, really small.

Every day we can find a way to serve others.  
Every day we can find a way to open ourselves to the needs of another.

And through serving in this small way we can learn to be open about our own fears and needs.

Let's be real about this.  
All of us are afraid.  
All of us are afraid

But, we can't lessen that fear by being quiet.  
We lessen our fear by loving and serving others in the name of Jesus.

Each time we put our arms around another person in compassion we will find that our fears are not as great as they once were.

Each time we put our arms around a "little one," we come closer to the kingdom of God.

Amen.