

Egos Aside
Mark 9:30-37

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Carla J. Bailey

Preaching is kind of a funny job. It's a little like writing a weekly editorial. Only, of course, Christian preachers have something of a narrower scope. Sometimes we teach. Sometimes we are providing pastoral care, the tenderest of words to a heart-broken people. Sometimes we address issues in our particular congregations. In fact, the very best preaching comes after a preacher has come to know her congregation much better than I know you. Occasionally, a sermon is what we call prophetic, which is to say it resembles the task of the Old Testament prophets who directly addressed Israel's rulers with the Word of God, as they had come to know it or hear it. These were almost always fairly critical exhortations – course corrections, so to speak, delivered to kings who were not all that excited to get the news. And they also almost always addressed an issue of that particular day – battles, governmental incompetence, betrayals and the like. Alas, preachers like to deliver these kinds of sermons a lot more than parishioners like to hear them. I'm not altogether certain what category today's sermon falls in to but I'd guess it's pretty close to this last. I have some things to say about battles, governmental incompetence, and betrayal.

But first, let's look at the passage from Mark. Let me just begin by saying, I can't, for the life of me, imagine what it must have been like to be one of Jesus' disciples. They were all men, the first barrier to my comprehension. They were poor, and though I am not rich, I'm certainly comfortable, economically. They were willing to spend a great deal of time in the company of someone they didn't understand and that is really not true of me. I understand Warren pretty well, and I really like to keep my own company so what's so hard to understand on that score?

But in spite of the limits on what we have in common with those first disciples, the gospels reveal some things about them that I suspect we do understand - universal truths that might not take much of a stretch to imagine. Today's story from Mark reveals one of those very times. The disciples were arguing among themselves, which one of them was the greatest. This is just one of several consecutive stories in which the disciples demonstrate that they do not really get what is going on around them. As they walked through Galilee, Jesus tried to teach them about both the glory and the suffering that awaited him but "they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him." When they finally arrived for rest in a house in Capernaum, Jesus asked them what they had been arguing about on the road. They greeted his question with silence for, as Mark reveals, "they had argued with one another who was the greatest."

Were they embarrassed Jesus caught them? It doesn't require much imagination to know what that feels like – to be caught with our egos puffed up like balloons. Maybe they didn't know they had done anything wrong. When Jesus asked them the question, they simply didn't answer. But I think Mark suggests that the disciples had been caught doing something they knew was beneath this man whose ministry they witnessed with awe and lack of understanding. I suspect they were sheepish that they had been discussing something so selfish and unimportant as to who enjoyed the greater rank among them. I think we have been given the gift of the disciples' imperfect, occasionally petty, and oh-so-familiar

example of the gap between what Jesus taught and what those around him, including ourselves, are willing to live.

Jesus questioned his disciples about their disappointing behavior, and they were silent. We don't know how long Jesus allowed that silence to go on. We do not know (though I enjoy imagining) the expression on Jesus' face as he looked at them. "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all". His words imply that he knew what they had been discussing. But would they come to understand that greatness is a matter of humility, of servanthood, of over-turned social positions and radically changed stature, of selflessness? Would they ever come to understand that, in spite of the miracles they had witnessed, to be disciples – true disciples - would cost them some pretty heavy social capital?

OK, here's comes the prophetic preaching. Like you, I've been watching events unfold surrounding the confirmation of the candidate for the Supreme Court, Judge Brett Kavanaugh, and the accusation brought against him by Dr. Christine Blasey Ford that when they were both teens, he a couple years older than she and drunk to boot, assaulted her – an experience that she understood to be an attempted rape. This is an incredibly serious allegation. And it is being handled at the Senate level in a way that is painfully reminiscent of the hearings of October, 1991 when law professor Anita Hill brought sexual harassment allegations against now Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas. Those hearings in 1991 had a profound impact on me – so significant in fact, that I began working intentionally, as a volunteer, with women who have experienced sexual trauma; so significant in fact, that I determined that I would someday receive a legal education so that I could more effectively care and advocate for victims.

But that's not what I want to talk about today. No, this morning I want to address just one tiny portion of this current public ordeal, and I want to use the snippet of the story from Mark about how the disciples were arguing about which one was greatest and when Jesus asked them what they were arguing about, they remained silent.

In a difficult, but powerful article published a few days ago in the Washington Post, "What Do We Owe Her Now?" (September 21, 2018, https://wapo.st/arlington-texas?tid=ss_mail), investigative journalist Elizabeth Bruenig told the story of a young woman who was raped when she was in high school in Arlington, Texas. The writer went to the same high school and has wondered for these past ten years or more whatever happened to that young woman who, soon after the assault, simply disappeared. Her story is familiar and heart-breaking. It includes out-of-control drinking, economic class bias, naïveté, privileged and entitled athletes, and irresponsible adults. It's a story that has been repeated over and over and over and over. If you can bear it, just look at #why I didn't report to learn more about the fear of reporting allegations.

In this story, reporter Bruenig made a powerful observation. She wrote: *To look into the eyes of a vulnerable person is to see yourself as you might be. It's a more harrowing experience than one might readily admit. There is a version of yourself made powerless, status diminished, reliant upon the goodwill of others. One response is empathy: to shore up your reserves of charity and trust, in hopes that others will do the same. Another is denial: If you refuse to believe you could ever be in such a position — perhaps by blaming the frail for their frailty or ascribing their vulnerability to moral failure — then you never have to face such an uncomfortable episode of imagination. You come away disgusted with the weak, but content in the certainty you aren't among them.*

Or they make you feel helpless, just by dint of how little you can do to stop what's being done to them. The temptation in that case is to look away, let it all be someone else's problem, or deny that there's a problem in need of resolution in the first place.

It is tempting to imagine that, if all of this really had happened now, in the wake of #MeToo, things would have been different and justice better served.

What we are seeing in this morality play between Judge Kavanaugh, Dr. Ford, and the Greek chorus of U.S. Senators, Christian friends, is that justice is not being better served. No, justice is being tossed about in tweets and deadlines and ultimatums. It's being revealed for what it is when it comes to claims of sexual assault and harassment by privileged boys and powerful men. She is being blamed for all of it – for “letting” it happen in the first place, for not reporting it when it happened, for her inability to deal with it emotionally, for bringing it to the light of day, for slowing the process, for asking for an FBI investigation, for besmirching the reputation of a good man – all of it. It's all her fault.

Egos are tricky things. They are so easily influenced by less than honorable emotions like jealousy or revenge or righteous indignation or insecurity or a need to demonstrate power or superiority. They are swayed by protocols, procedures, and personalities. With just the barest pieces of information, we draw radical conclusions, about that young woman from Arlington, Texas, or the researcher from Palo Alto, California, or the thousands upon thousands of women who are all thinking, if not saying out loud, “me too”.

What if Jesus were to come upon some of the conversations Americans have been having about this situation – some of the conversation I've been having, you've been having, if not with one another, then in our heads as we've read articles and opinion pieces, as we've learned of death threats against her and a strange charge of mistaken identity from one of his friends. What if Jesus were to ask us “What were you talking about back there?” I'd like to be able to do better than to answer him with silence, wouldn't you? I'd like to be able to answer with courage and honor – we were talking about how to make life better for girls and women, how to stop blaming them for the bad behavior of boys and men. We were talking about dignity and self-worth and placing principle over politics. We were talking about resisting the temptation to make others feel inferior so we can feel superior. We were talking about gender equity and breaking the silence and shame. We were talking about making the world safe for our daughters and sisters and mothers. That's what we were talking about. That's what we're talking about. That. Amen.