

**Sermon preached by Tom Haynes
at St. Elizabeth's, Culver
September 20, 2009
Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost – Year B (Proper 20)**

Proverbs 31:10-31

Psalm 1

James 3:13-4:3, 7-8a

Mark 9:30-37

“May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be an acceptable offering in your sight, Oh Lord, my strength and my redeemer.”

I taught at the Webb School in Bell Buckle, TN for six years and nine summers back in the 80's. This was a great place for me and Susan in many ways, and I have kept up with friends and former students from Webb over the years. Webb was a school started right after the Civil War when widows ran boarding houses and soldiers returning from the battlefields needed work. Reconstruction was an ugly time and boarding schools sprang up in the South.

The founder of the school was a deeply religious man, and he left a mark on the place. One of the interesting things he did was that he started each school year by reading Psalm 1 as the first thing in the first school assembly. I preached last Sunday on taking the next step in our spiritual journey and beginning with Scripture. Sawney Webb probably would have liked that sermon, and he was a guy who took this advice.

1

Happy are they who have not walked in the counsel of the wicked, *
nor lingered in the way of sinners,
nor sat in the seats of the scornful!

2

Their delight is in the law of the LORD, *
and they meditate on his law day and night.

3

They are like trees planted by streams of water,
bearing fruit in due season, with leaves that do not wither; *
everything they do shall prosper.

4

It is not so with the wicked; *
they are like chaff which the wind blows away.

5

Therefore the wicked shall not stand upright when judgment comes, *
nor the sinner in the council of the righteous.

6

For the LORD knows the way of the righteous, *
but the way of the wicked is doomed.

I am going to shift gears for a minute and come back. Don't lose that thought. I have a couple of things to say about the Gospel.

When I read the Gospel today, I am reminded of the times my father would yell down the stairs, "What are you boys doing down there?" The only proper answer to this question it seems is "Nothing," and that is what we said for sure. My father had a certain sense for when we were up to mischief and could stop all sorts of evil plans with a simple question. My guess is that many of you had mothers or fathers with a similar gift.

In this Gospel reading, Jesus is walking with the disciples on the way to Capernaum. He is describing his death and resurrection. This is what is called the second Passion prophecy in Mark. Jesus is essentially teaching here. He is laying out the hard stuff and the disciples should be taking notes. Instead they are arguing about who is greatest. This is a classic teacher moment. The disciples just don't get it.

I have this visual of Jesus calling down the stairs "Hey, what is going on down there?" "Nothing," they reply. Jesus knows perfectly well what they were arguing about, just like my father knew we were up to no good when he asked.

What about the students at Webb? How much of Psalm 1 did they understand? One of the traditions at Webb was that student who had gotten in trouble would have to "stand and face your peers" in Chapel. One consequence for misbehavior was having to stand up in Chapel and hear what you had done. These offenses of honor and discipline were offenses against community standards you see. You had to own them publically and have the assembled community hear your punishment.

This tradition is contained in Psalm 1. "Therefore the wicked shall not stand upright when judgment comes." How many students really understood what that Psalm would mean to them before the end of the school year. I claim "not many."

You think the disciples had any clue what Jesus had facing Him? What about their own near futures? There is no way.

Now, here is the thing that I have been chewing on this week. The disciples don't get it. They are all about themselves as they walk with Jesus. They rise to greatness through grace and die as saints of the Church.

Somewhat oddly I see this as a message of hope. Let me explain.

I am going to confess right now that sometimes I don't get it. I am doing that whole "stand and face your peers" thing and owning up in public that sometimes I am all about myself as I am walking with Jesus. I am not proud of this or anything, but "facts is facts" as they say. I need to be honest.

My reason for hope is that the disciples through grace do redeem a few stupid moments. I figure there is a precedent here for a sinner like me. Grace is an amazing thing. I suspect you have heard that before. It is not just amazing for St. Peter. It is amazing for Tom Haynes as well.

Jesus has another one of those teacher moments. He tells the disciples to sit down and listen carefully. He is going to spell it out using small words. I have been there with classes of mine.

Jesus tells them the short version of what he has been saying is “service.” He tells them “Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.” This is not a new concept for Jesus. This is not the first time he has talked “service.”

We answer God’s call through service. We do it by helping those who can’t help themselves. Think of children in the time of Jesus. They were not much more than property. They were an asset on the balance sheet. You could rent them out basically as indentured servants. They were your hands to plant/harvest. It was a tough time to be a kid. Almost the only demographic in the 1st century Middle East that had it harder than children was the widow demographic. Maybe the disabled demographic was pretty bad too. It turns out there were lots of opportunities for service.

Now Jesus was not just *talking* about service. It was not an abstract concept. There were opportunities for it everywhere you looked. Jesus does not have to go looking for a child to make his point.

Here is the thing. We are called to service. We answer God’s call by serving those who need our help. They are all around us too. Go figure.

Here is the second thing. All of us fall short. We are the disciples walking with Jesus who don’t always get it.

Here is the third thing. God’s grace is sufficient. We can do it.

I am reminded of our baptismal promises. We are asked a series of questions.

Will you continue in the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in the prayers?

I will, with God’s help.

Will you persevere in resisting evil, and, whenever you fall into sin, repent and return to the Lord?

I will, with God’s help.

Will you proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ?

I will, with God’s help.

Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself?

I will, with God’s help.

Will you strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being?

I will, with God's help.

So we are called to service.

We get it wrong, and we think of ourselves and don't listen to Jesus.

We can do it though, and we *will* do it with God's help.

I have said these words in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen