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September 19, 2021
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Faith Faces Fear for Neighbor

Mark 9:30-37, NRSV, emended

(From the area around Caesarea Philippi, Jesus and his disciples turned southward) and passed through Galilee. He did not want anyone to know it; 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." But they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask.

Then they came to Capernaum; and when Jesus was in the house he asked them, "What were you arguing about along the way?" But they kept silent, for on the way they had argued with one another who was the greatest. Jesus sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all." Then he took a little child and put it in their midst. Then taking it in his arms, he said to them, "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me."

A colleague of mine serves deep, deep in the heart of Suburblandia, where there is a megachurch on every corner, he says, and, in the last year or so, every single one is proclaiming, "Faith over fear." It is on their signs, their sermon series, in their weekly emails. And, I don't think it is probably fair or kind to judge another church's choices. We have all been struggling to do what is right. But it is also true that we are endlessly bombarded with reasons to be afraid. Newspapers, twenty-four-hour news channels, documentaries on every topic under the sun. The old adage still rings true, "If it bleeds, it leads." We are tossed about on the sea of emotion, pushed and pulled by powerful forces. I believe our faith speaks directly to this, asking us to refused to be swayed into fear by what is false. But what about when we have every reason to be afraid? What then? I disagree that "faith over fear" is the answer to the pandemic, especially if it means that I get to do whatever I want to do for whatever reasons I have. Faith for my own selfish reasons is not faith, nor is it particularly courageous. Following Christ is not meant to lead us to our greatest triumph. More often, it asks to directly confront our deepest fears, but not for self-preservation. In Christ, we choose faith in the face of fear for the sake of our neighbor.

In Mark's gospel, whenever someone claims Jesus is the Messiah, Jesus quickly shushes them. Fame about Jesus spreads quickly, and soon everyone is like the disciples: sure that Jesus is the Messiah, and the Messiah was to be a conquering hero that would bring an end to Roman rule and restore Israelite rule to Israel. So he tries to keep these rumors quiet, and to counter them with the truth about the Messiah and himself: that the Messiah

is not a conquering hero, but a suffering servant. Three times Jesus tells his disciples about what is to come: the Son of Man—that is, the Child of Humanity—will be betrayed, killed, and will—three days later—rise again. Three times he tells them this, and three times...it is like they never even heard him. In chapter eight, Peter, who had just confessed Jesus as Messiah, then tells Jesus to can it, and Jesus calls him Satan. Today, the disciples, some coming down off the mountain having witnessed the Transfiguration and some having more-or-less successfully continued Jesus' ministry of healing—today, they're arguing about who is the greatest. And in the next chapter, when Jesus tells the truth about the future, James and John will come to him and ask to be his right- and left-hand men in the coming kingdom. It is like they never even heard him.

You have to remember who these disciples were. They weren't listed in the who's who of ancient Israel. They weren't wealthy or of great value to society. Sure, there were those lower on the ladder than them—women and children, the disabled and strange, if these people even registered as being on the ladder—but, from their vantage point, they were near the bottom rung of the ladder. For them, following Jesus, following the Messiah, meant they might have the opportunity to flip the ladder, but, as the Salt Project's commentary puts it, they were "still preserving the ladder." The disciples believe that they're following Jesus and it is going to make them great. And Jesus basically says, "You're right, but not in the way you're thinking. Every time Jesus tells them what is going to happen and they get it so wrong, Jesus tells them what it means to be a disciple. It is a hard teaching. The disciples think the Messiah is a triumphant conqueror, but Jesus says the Messiah is a servant—a suffering servant. Greatness, Jesus says, isn't from getting to the top, but in descending to the bottom, not as a king, but as a servant. Not as a full-grown man, but as a helpless child. Not in preserving our lives, but in giving them up.

And this, in all honesty, is terrifying. I know how to climb a ladder. We train our whole lives to look up, to plan, to dream. Always up. And, if you can't climb higher, just be sure there is someone below you. We find Jesus's truth just as terrifying and disorienting as the disciples. We don't know what to do if there isn't a ladder.

When we say faith over fear, this is what we're talking about. I do not consider myself to be a brave person. I am risk-adverse, timid. Too often, I have found myself paralyzed, unable to act with decisiveness. I have found great comfort in the verse from First John 4 which begins, "There is no fear in love, because perfect love casts out fear." It isn't faith over fear, as if faith instills in us a kind of courage that allows us to be reckless, to plow over our neighbors, to seize what we want. Rather, it is love and faith and, yes, courage, but also vulnerability and neighborliness.

By all accounts, the disciples are ready to barrel ahead, to take Jerusalem by storm, to rally the troops, to win. There is no room to be afraid. They choose not hear what Jesus says because it might give them pause, it might make them second guess, it might make them afraid. Faith isn't being unafraid when there is reason for caution, faith simply puts the needs of one's neighbor, the needs of least above whatever might be causing their fear.

Because that is what Jesus did; because that is who Jesus is; and because that is what Jesus calls his disciples to do.

We're all—rightly—so ready to get back to the way things used to be, but our faith calls us to something different. Not to hurry back with demands geared to our comfort, but to wonder about what has held back my neighbor, what has put their lives at greater risk, what catastrophe has hit them. Tragedy tugs at the edges of society's structure and permits us a glimpse at the hidden structures that hold up the systems that inflict great damage on humanity. What has been unveiled, and what can we tear down? What curtain that divides can be turned into dress-up clothes for child's play? What glass ceiling can be converted to a funhouse mirror, revealing its distortions? What ladder can become a playground?

Beloved, I struggled to find something this week that comes from my heart to yours because all of this scares me. Like anyone, I cling tightly to the status quo, to what is knowable and predictable. It is no wonder that calls for "faith over fear" have rung out when faced with a plague. It is an easy thing to believe that we will be sustained by what has been predictable in the past. But that isn't faith, not the kind that Jesus is talking about. The faith Jesus calls us to will lead us down unknown paths. The faith Jesus calls us to will ask us to stand toe to toe with our greatest fear, not in order to prove our own faith or courage, Beloved, but in order to tear down what binds our neighbor and so, to set our neighbor free.

Amen.