
Sermon – 18th Sunday after Pentecost
Mark 9:30-37
September 23, 2018
“Going Downhill”

In the 1980's a Child Psychologist at Harvard, David Heller, collected letters that children had written to God. He compiled them into a book which he titled; *"Dear God."* The "cute ones" were about how God managed to keep lions away from zebra's on Noah's Ark, and what Jesus' manger smelled like. But Dr. Heller was interested in the reflective side of a child's faith. One letter was from a 10 year old boy named Ian which read: *"Dear God, I have doubts about you sometimes. Sometimes I really believe. Like when I was four and I hurt my arm and you healed it up fast. But my question is, if you could do that why you don't stop the wars, the diseases and the famines. Why don't you take away drugs? And there are problems in other neighborhoods too. I'll try to believe more. (Signed) Ian."*

Who of us cannot relate to that child's letter and not asked similar questions? One of the most conspicuous (even frustrating) details in our reading from Mark is the unwillingness of the disciples to ask Jesus anything. Poet Robert Frost once said *"The brain is a wonderful organ; it starts the moment you get up in the morning and doesn't stop until you get to the office."* One could well apply Frost's adage (and not infrequently) to the disciples of our Lord as portrayed in Mark. If time spent with Jesus could be likened in any way to a *"day at the office"* - the day described in our lesson shows 12 men with switches clearly in the "off" position.

Perhaps it was that disquieting reluctance to lay bear their adult souls more than anything else that caused Jesus to take a child and hold it up as the model for faith. At least he might get some questions from the kid. Jesus' predication of his impending death came right after he'd been transfigured on a mountain only to descend and meet a child possessed by a demon, which Jesus disciples could do nothing about. There's a painting by the Italian artist Raphael showing Jesus' descent from that Mount of Transfiguration. Raphael vividly depicts the contrast between the top of the mountain and the bottom. Above is the serenity of heaven and below the struggle of earth, the impotence of the disciples to do anything about it, and the useless discussion among them about who was the greatest.

The painting not surprisingly is titled *"The Transfiguration"* but it might just as well be named *"going downhill."* Now when we use that term we sometimes mean that the hard work is over and reward is coming. But it can just as easily mean things aren't going well. If we say of a person *"he's going downhill"* we usually mean they've seen better days. In Raphael's

imagination, there is a nobler sense of those words however - in which the glory of Jesus is really best understood when he *"goes downhill"* from the sheltered high places where he held communion with God to the crowded, noisy places of human need.

Raphael understood something though. He understood that in every age there are people who expend themselves in the fine art of "going uphill," climbing to some height of advantage or power. They pay scant attention to the much finer art of going downhill - the path Jesus took, from the place of divine vision to the place of compassionate deed, from the high hill of privilege to the low plain of need.

Why else then, when at another time Jesus did coax a question from his disciples...about prayer, would he have taught them to pray, *"Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done...on earth as it is in heaven?"* We pray that way because God's will is not done on this earth. But really we pray that way so that our prayers might coax us to break from the tradition of the disciples and ask a few hard questions about the will of God, moving in determined faith from *"why isn't it being done"* to, as Luther said, *"how can it be done among us"?*

We will soon stand and proclaim: *"I believe in God the Father Almighty..."* but it may not be long until something will cause us to ask *"I wonder if God the Father really is almighty."* Questions do not however equal doubts. Think of the questions we field from kids about a whole range of things in life. They don't question because they doubt so much as they long to know...and such a longing is as much a sign of faith present as absent.

Oh I know, sometimes the "whhhyyy" question in response to the suggestion they go to bed or do homework is dripping with doubt about the need for such a thing. Yet what a picture of inspiration for us adult types for Jesus to place a child in his lap against the backdrop of silent disciples and invite us to imitate them in their questioning! To ask, Jesus said after all, is to receive...to seek Jesus promised...is to find.

Little Ian's letter to God seemed to be confessing doubts, but I ask you - why ask something of someone you don't believe in? Why indeed? But you do believe, and in belief you pray. You ascend a high holy place with your prayers - you enter the place where God is. God has commanded you to pray and has promised to hear you. If you will, that ascent is the hard part of faith...its all "downhill" from there. But those places is where God wants you to be - because that's where Jesus is too. AMEN