17thSundayAfterPentecost

Mark 9:30-37

Good and gracious God give us ears to hear your word and mouths that speak your truth. Amen.

The disciples are having a rough two weeks. Last week we witnessed Jesus call Peter, Satan and this week Jesus is not at all impressed to discover his disciples arguing over who is the best among them. And in both of these Gospel lessons the disciples suffer from a lack of understanding when it comes to what Jesus is telling them. “…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 him.” This is also what he was telling the disciples when Peter rebuked him last week.

Jesus tells his disciples many times what is going to happen to him, but none of them ever seem to truly understand what he is telling them. And in today’s lesson it specifically states that they didn’t understand and were afraid to ask him what he meant. Why are they afraid to seek understanding? Are they afraid to have any conversation surrounding Jesus’s future because of the way his conversation with Peter went? Or are they afraid to show that they don’t understand what Jesus is saying to them and that makes them feel unworthy? Or maybe they each had their own reasons for not asking Jesus what he means.

Professor and commentator Amy Oden had this to share with us about today’s gospel lesson. “It’s not just that they don’t understand some piece of information. It’s that they don’t understand this specific teaching, at the very heart of the Incarnation. How is it possible for the Son of God to suffer and die? And why should it happen? The question that the disciples are afraid to ask is the question that propels so many early Christian attempts to construct an intelligible, if misguided, Christology. Maybe Jesus didn’t really suffer and die (Docetism) or maybe only the human part of Jesus suffered but the divine part was untouched (Gnosticism). Early Christians struggle with what sort of deity lets her/himself get into a corner like that? They needed an almighty God who conquers enemies, not one who suffers and dies. Underneath verses 31-32 are the basic questions of who Jesus is, and of the nature of God. Such a self-demoting God could hardly be trustworthy…Verse 34 reveals what happens to the disciples when they sidestep the real questions they are afraid to ask — they turn to arguing with each other, squabbling among themselves over petty issues of rank and status (verse 34). There is a direct line drawn from verse 32 to verse 34. When the disciples avoid asking hard questions, they focus on posturing about who is right.”

Professor Oden goes on to talk about how when we also avoid the hard questions in life we to end up focused on the wrong things. There were times at the beginning of my relationship with my husband that we would try to avoid the more serious conversations because we didn’t want the other to become uncomfortable only for us to fight later over something stupid. We learned quickly that we needed to talk about our actual problems instead of letting them fester and then having a blow up over something nonsequential. This happens in all relationships and communities, including our faith communities.

How many times have our faith communities argued over hymns or banners or the bread used during communion, while avoiding conversations of how to reach out to the community at large? Or how to become more welcoming and inclusive to our siblings of color or our siblings who are LGBTQ+? Or why so many young, female pastors end up having to leave first call early because internalized misogyny? Or that the previous church model of one pastor, one congregation is no longer feasible for many rural congregations? Or lets look at something on a smaller scale, but no less important, how many times have we avoided asking questions about the bible or Christianity out of fear of embarrassment for not already knowing?

We avoid the tough and uncomfortable conversations because they ARE uncomfortable, and they matter, and we don’t know what the outcome will be. And instead, we focus on the things that don’t really matter in the grand scheme of things to avoid the uncomfortable. The hard conversations must be had. The disciples avoided the hard conversation of Jesus’s suffering and death and ended up fighting with one another about who among them was the greatest. And while they may have avoided this hard conversation, they can’t avoid them all and Jesus will continue to put them in uncomfortable positions and conversations that will force them outside of their comfort zones and help them grow.

We cannot avoid growth and change forever, eventually it will all come to a head, and we will be forced to have the hard, uncomfortable conversations that we were trying to avoid. It’s the fear of change, the embarrassment of not already knowing, the very human desire to avoid things that are uncomfortable that keeps us from having the conversations that we need to have. Do not let fear rule you. I want to share what Professor Oden ended her commentary with: “The good news is that Jesus welcomes us even when we do not understand or do not know. This pericope closes with Jesus embracing a child, the ultimate symbol of not knowing, not understanding, immature and undeveloped. We need not fear our questions, our misunderstandings, our confusion or our curiosity in the presence of One whose “perfect love casts out all fear” (1 John 4:18).”

If you have ever been around a child, especially a child that trust you, you know that they do not avoid the uncomfortable questions or conversations. They do not fear the uncomfortable, the not knowing, the hard questions. They crave to understand everything about the world around them and that makes them brave. Their inherent trust makes them brave. Mark 9:36 Then he took a little child and put it among them; and 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."

Trust that God will get you through the hard and the uncomfortable questions and conversations. Trust that that the hard and uncomfortable questions and conversations in your life will lead to growth and understanding that will ultimately bring about positive change to your life. Do not be afraid, trust. For our Teacher who draws us into uncomfortable conversations and growth, but promises that we will never be alone, we give thanks this day and always. Amen.