

The Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost B 2024  
September 22, 2024  
Mark 9:30-37  
(Sermon by the Reverend Michelle Manicke)

When we meet up with Jesus' disciples in today's gospel reading, I think it's fair to say they're feeling overwhelmed and uneasy. As they walk in Jesus' footsteps, their minds are no doubt spinning, as they try to process all the things they've been experiencing. I imagine they're thinking, "Wow. What a difference a day—or at least a couple of days—can make!..." To give you some context, today's reading from Mark 9 picks up just a few days after Peter and James and John's mystical mountaintop encounter, where they witness a vision of Jesus, transfigured in radiant light, speaking with Moses and Elijah. And as if that weren't unsettling enough, their vision is punctuated by God's voice speaking to them from the cloud, declaring, "This is my beloved Son. Listen to him!..." And then, just a short time after having come down the mountain, Peter, James, and John join the rest of the twelve in watching Jesus cast out a particularly stubborn "demon" that has been preventing a young boy from speaking and hearing. As they watch all these amazing things take place, they become ever more convinced that the Spirit of God is with Jesus, and they come believe he is indeed the Messiah who will finally set them free from their Roman oppressors.

Given all this, can you imagine how unsettled and fearful the disciples must feel when Jesus starts telling them for the second time that he's going to be betrayed into human hands, be killed, and be raised from the dead after three days?! How can this be?! How can the Son of God—the One they've just seen bathed in divine light and power, the One who's just performed an astonishing exorcism—be killed by human hands?! It just doesn't make sense!... And the narrator tells us, "They didn't understand what [Jesus] was saying, and they were afraid to ask him."<sup>1</sup>

So, this begs the question: why are the disciples afraid to ask Jesus to help them understand what he's trying to teach them? Maybe they're kind of like I used to be as a kid: embarrassed and hesitant to ask because they don't want to appear ignorant. Or maybe they're exhausted, and they just can't "deal" in that moment. Or maybe they just really don't want to know the details because even on the surface Jesus' ominous prediction sounds nothing like the revolutionary outcome they've been envisioning.... So, what do they do instead of asking the deeper question? They do what human beings so often do! They distract themselves by talking about something shallow and socially acceptable. In this case, they launch into a heated discussion about which of them is the greatest.

Now, you and I may laugh because we find this discussion topic quite absurd, but I have to ask: don't we all do this? I mean, doesn't every one of us sometimes turn away from meaty and meaningful conversations, distracting ourselves instead with fluffy, cotton candy conversations about things like which sports team or athlete or actor or singer is the GOAT—that is, "the greatest of all time." At different points in our lives, some of us also boast about ourselves, our friends, or those whom we admire: "My dad is stronger than your dad." "I can outrun you any day of the week!" "My friends sings better than anyone in this room." "My candidate is a greater leader than your wimpy, incompetent candidate!" etc.... And don't even get me started on some of the shallow, misleading, inaccurate stuff that gets posted and discussed on social media! Most

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew 9:32.

of us know that's where stuff gets rehashed over and over, and yet nobody's paying attention to other points of view. Instead, each person is so busy defending their own point of view that no one is learning or growing.... That's kind of what Jesus' first disciples are doing, and that's why Jesus calls them on it and then proceeds to turn their discussion about "who's the greatest" into a teaching moment. In a nutshell, when Jesus puts a small child in their midst and then takes the child into his arms, he's teaching his followers that to be considered "great" in the Kingdom of God we must love and serve our most vulnerable neighbors, including children, immigrants, the poor, the homeless, the elderly, people of color, people who are neurodivergent, and people who are LGBTQ.

Here I want to say that I find Jesus' teaching particularly relevant for us because one of the demons that haunts Christ's church to this day is the demon I'm going to call "Lack of Curiosity." It seems to me that many who follow Jesus are remarkably fearful and uncurious about things they don't understand. There seems to be a significant number of Christians who want to be told exactly what to believe and how to behave. In many cases, they want their religious leaders to hand them cut-and-dried answers, whether it's the Pope, their local pastor, or their favorite televangelist. But here's the thing, friends: the Bible is teeming with examples of God's people encountering situations that require them to make time and space for prayerfully asking questions, discussing, and discerning how God is leading them along many a thorny pathway and through many a murky gray area. We are, after all, finite human beings, so we're inevitably going to have questions about all kinds of things we don't understand! And if we don't ask questions, how can we grow in faith and love? And if you and I don't feel comfortable asking questions and having meaningful conversations about things that matter within the church, which is the Body of Christ here on earth, where on earth can we have those conversations?

As your pastor, I want to encourage you to ask questions about things you don't understand. Like you, I don't have all the answers, either, but I sincerely hope you feel safe asking your questions. I've now served with you here at Zoar for almost seven years, and during that time, one of my goals has been to strengthen the fabric of this community, so that we're more comfortable sharing our stories with each other. I think one of the first groups to create this kind of safe space has been our Thursday morning Bible study group. I'm so grateful for this curious group of lifelong learners, who also help me learn and grow!... And now it seems to me that the Holy Spirit is taking things to a new level, creating widening the circle of trust to create more spaces where people feel loved and supported enough that they can dare to be vulnerable and share their stories. It happened three weeks ago here in worship, when three courageous women each shared a poignant and meaningful story during the sermon time. It was amazing, and I'm so grateful. It happened again when I went to visit Dore Vaughn on Wednesday. I don't even remember how the flow of the conversation took us to a place where Dore vulnerably shared stories from her childhood in Nazi Germany, while weaving them together with observations about the state of our world today. We also talked about today's gospel reading, and toward the end of the conversation, Dore thanked me for taking her seriously and for being interested in what she has to say. I must've looked a bit stunned because she went on to explain, "So often people think that we older people are all muddled and have nothing intelligent or interesting to say..." It made me sad to hear that, but at the same time, I was grateful. For one thing, I made a mental note to give renewed attention to such things when I visit folks in the future. That very same evening, I was blessed to help facilitate Zoar's Reconciling in Christ Task Force. Thirteen people showed up, and we have several more who will join us in the future. Following a suggestion from one of our team members, we each took turns sharing a bit of our story about

why it's important to us personally that Zoar work toward building a more inclusive church. Friends, it was so moving to hear the stories: stories of deep pain mingled with great love and new hope for our family members, our congregation, and our neighbors. And once again, I found myself saying a spontaneous prayer of thanksgiving for the incredible joy of being in a place where trust is deepening, so that people feel comfortable putting down roots and creating space where our stories can nourish and help all of us grow in faith and love. But as I told our group on Wednesday evening, we cannot take this for granted. As we've seen with our democracy, this is true of anything that matters. Each of us must keep working to nurture trust, encouraging each other and holding each other accountable.

So, now I want to challenge you to do two things: 1. In the words of one of my favorite TV shows, "Ted Lasso," I want to challenge you to "be curious, not judgmental." I love this quote because when we're curious about others—especially about our neighbors who are vulnerable—it helps us see them as fellow human beings. When we recognize our shared humanity, we're much less likely to judge and dehumanize our neighbors, which is, tragically, what's been happening to Haitian immigrants in Springfield, Ohio these past few weeks. 2. The second thing I'd like to challenge you to do is to take a moment to reflect and remember: when was the last time you had a rich and meaningful conversation about things that truly matter? How did you feel afterward? Did it change you or help you grow? I'm curious!...

[If anyone has a story they'd like to share, I'll pass the microphone around!...]

In closing, I have one last invitation for you: I invite you to pay close attention and ponder the lyrics of our hymn of the day, especially the first verse:

Let us build a house where love can grow,  
and all can safely live,  
a place where saints and children tell  
How hearts learn to forgive.  
Built of hopes and dreams and visions,  
rock of faith and vault of grace;  
here the love of Christ shall end divisions:  
all are welcome, all are welcome,  
all are welcome in this place.

May it be so. Thanks be to God! Amen.