**September 19, 2021** “Elementary Faith”

Psalm 1, James 3: 13- 4:8a, Mark 9: 30-37

“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.”

Friends, I have Good News today.

The Good News I have today is that this word we have just heard, given to the disciples many years ago, and passed down through the centuries of the church, this summary of the Good News of Jesus given *by* Jesus has set us free.

This news about the Son of Man, his betrayal into human hands, his death, and his resurrection has set us free in a way that we never thought possible:

The Good News of this Good News is that it’s “not about us.”

“It’s not about us.” Thanks be to God.

Let me explain what I mean.

In this morning’s Gospel, Mark tells us that when Jesus and the disciples were passing through Galilee, Jesus taught them this lesson:

“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.”

As the disciples followed Jesus through the countryside, He was giving them the answers, the answer key to all that was about to take place:

No more secrets.

Here is what is about to happen to the Son of Man for the salvation of the world.

What would *you* do with such information? How would *you* react if you had just been handed the answer key to Jesus *by Jesus*?

Well, Mark tells us, they didn’t react. At least not right away.

Mark says “But they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him.”

Now each of us, at some moment in our lives has surely thought: “If I could only ask God.”

“If I could only ask God” why the world is the way that it is

“If I could only ask God” why I am the way that I am

“If I could only ask God” how this is all going to turn out, then I would truly have peace

And yet, given that opportunity, having the Son of God standing right before them, the disciples are too ignorant and too shy to speak up.

And here (I really think) is where things start to go wrong that day for the disciples.

You see, I think that it’s *possible* that each of the twelve disciples was simply too overwhelmed, too lost, too confused to form a question, and so they each individually stayed quiet.

But don’t you think it more likely that at least one, at least one of the twelve was clear enough in their own mind that they wanted to ask Jesus “Master, could you repeat that, and maybe explain it a bit?”

So why didn’t they?

Why didn’t that one disciple put up his hand and ask God the question on his mind? An opportunity so valuable and wonderful, the rest of us can only dream of doing it?

Why didn’t they speak up?

Well, in order to ask a question in this way, whether its to Jesus on the roadside to Galilee, or in a school classroom, or in any other situation where you simply do not understand what the teacher is teaching, it actually requires something of you.

It requires you to admit that you do not know something.

And not only does it require you to admit that you do not know, it requires you to show your teacher and your peers that you don’t know something.

For many of us, and I think most of us at one point in our life or another, this experience fills us with anxiety.

In that moment we would rather be anywhere else in the world, doing anything else in the world, rather than sitting there with our hand up waiting for everyone to find out what we don’t know.

These kinds of experiences can make us feel ignorant, or dumb, or that surely everyone else understands what we don’t.

And yet what is the real problem?

Is it that we *are* ignorant or stupid?

Is it that we *should* understand a difficult concept right away that we have just been introduced to?

No. It’s that we have, in this moment, convinced ourselves “it’s all about us.”

If we convince ourselves “it is all about us”, what we know or don’t know, what our classmates or our teacher will think of us, that kind of thinking can absolutely paralyze us.

That kind of thinking, that kind of self-doubt, and bruised ego, and self-criticism can leave us speechless when (ironically) the best thing we can do for ourselves is ask questions.

“Um, excuse me, I didn’t quite catch that. Can you repeat what you just said?”

It’s simple, so why the struggle?

Why did the disciples clam up in front of Jesus after being given the opportunity of a lifetime?

As human beings, both then and now, it’s difficult to get out of our own way.

Mark tells us that after the disciples were stuck, too afraid to ask Jesus anything, they kept walking, and eventually they must have started speaking with one another because when they reached Capernaum, Jesus asked them “What were you arguing about on the way?”

Well again, the disciples clammed up.

They were silent, Mark says, because on the way they had “argued with one another about who was the greatest.”

Not the disciples’ finest moment.

Earlier, when given the chance to ask about the answer to life and God you say nothing, but now you argue amongst yourselves about who is the best of you?

It’s not a good look, but, again, it is an understandable one.

You see, in their silence to admit to Jesus what they had spoken of on the way, the disciples showed that they knew better.

And *we* know better too:

We *know* behaving in such a self-centred way is not right.

We *know* that we should come to Jesus in prayer with our questions.

We *know* that we should not waste the lives God has given us by arguing about who is greatest.

But we also do and fail to do all of these things. Don’t we?

We clam up in-front of Jesus.

We sometimes act like He’s not even there, waiting patiently for us to come and ask our questions or give our prayers or petitions, for days or weeks or months at a time until we finally speak up.

Sometimes we even deny the Good News. Sometimes, upon hearing how we can be saved on the cross and in the tomb by Christ, we act as if it’s nothing but childish stories that so called “serious people” don’t waste their time with.

We temper our enthusiasm and our praises of God so that we aren’t judged by our neighbours for being “too religious”.

Not only do we do these things.

Not only do we clam up, not only do we stare at our feet in silence before Jesus, afraid to ask questions or come humbly before him, but when we do speak, when we do expend energy, we do it on the most ridiculous things.

The disciples may have been caught in their selfish little game of “who is the greatest” but we in our society of “me and mine” have turned this game into an entire way of life:

We are constantly goaded into comparing jobs and incomes, cars and houses as if these things are what really count.

Who is the greatest? Who has the most stuff? Who goes on the best vacations? Whose kids can go to the best schools? Who is the biggest pillar in the community? Who has the most friends on Facebook or followers on Instagram? Who can be an *influencer*?

Christians and even Christian leaders are often no better than this themselves:

Which church has the biggest online following?

Which pastor has the most popular podcast?

Whose book has sold the most copies?

This kind of boasting, this kind of egoism, and selfishness, it may be the way of our world, but God and Scripture do not look kindly upon it.

In our Epistle reading today, James identifies the source of this temptation “the devil” and calls on us to resist.

This selfish game the disciples were playing, this selfish game that we play, this game of “who is greatest/who has the biggest ego” it’s devilish, it’s stupid.

Far more stupid and more ignorant than the disciples feared they would appear when they were too overcome with ego to ask Jesus their questions.

And yet, it’s through that same ignorance that Jesus sets them free from themselves.

In the midst of these twelve men, these twelve men who had acted like man-children, Jesus put an actual child.

And then he took the child in his arms, and 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.”

In other words, Jesus says to the disciples: “It’s not about you.”

It’s not about you.

It’s not about your ego.

It’s not about your greatness.

It’s not about your stuff or your status.

It’s about following Jesus faithfully.

What does it mean to follow Jesus faithfully?

Jesus tells us that it is as simple as welcoming a child in His name.

*In. His. Name.*

As Christians living in a cultural era that is “all about us” it is easy to forget that what we are called to do is live our lives *in* Jesus.

To live as people, not interested in our own greatness or our own success, but as people saved, redeemed, and purchased by Christ.

To boldly proclaim “we are His”

Us and everything we are.

When we pray, we pray in His name.

When we speak, we speak in His name.

When we act, we act in His name.

When we work, we work in His name.

Shockingly (at least shockingly to this world) Christian discipleship is not something a person can “dabble” in.

We cannot claim to be Christians if we are Christians one hour per week and “all about us” people the rest of the time.

Being a Christian, following Jesus, means following (both trying to follow and allowing ourselves to be led by God) throughout our lives.

If we can be the kind of followers Jesus wants us to be, if we can welcome “one such child” in His name, using our voice and our actions and our intentions in His service, we will have achieved far more than we can looking out for ourselves.

Anyone can aggrandize themselves.

Anyone can boast, anyone can make a case that they are the greatest. Any of us can go on thinking “it’s all about us” and remain there forever.

But only someone who has allowed their lives *to be led by Him can do as He commands*, to welcome one such child in the name of the One who invites us into this life and the life to come, which is our reward.

I have often wondered, and maybe you have too, why a child?

Why welcome a child?

Why not a teenager, or an adult, or a senior? What is it about welcoming a child that is so special?

Well, as Jesus says: “whoever welcomes one such child welcomes me, and not me but the one who sent me.”

How is welcoming a child like welcoming God the Son, and not just the Son but also the Father and the Holy Spirit?

If you’ve ever welcomed a child into your home for the first time, you know that it is a situation with a bit more gravity than welcoming an adult guest.

A little while ago, I welcomed a friend from University to my new home and he brought his two young children, in preparation, I bought all kinds of groceries I don’t usually buy (juice and pop and snacks). I also picked up some toys and activities and games that I hoped would be fun for his children, and after I had run these errands, after I had figured out what I would offer these children and how I would try to invite them in so that they felt comfortable and had fun, I waited.

I waited and I realized that there was actually nothing I could do to make the visit a success.

There was nothing (really) that I could do to makes sure they wouldn’t find the snacks “yucky,” there was nothing I could do to make sure that I had all the right options of games and activities and things to do.

And in that moment, as the car pulled up and my friend and his young children got out and walked to the door, I laughed at myself, because there is nothing more humbling, more ego-less, than a full-grown man who hopes that a three- and a six year old like the welcome that he has planned for them.

What is it about children that frees us from the egoism that dominates so much of our lives?

Maybe its that they are so bluntly honest.

Maybe its that we remember what it was like being a child when everything was so new, so exciting, so overwhelming, and so frightening that we didn’t even try stifling our reactions.

Or maybe it’s just that, in welcoming a child, in trying to provide warmth and happiness and safety and fun to someone experiencing the world for the first time, we want them to experience only good things, we don’t want to give them any reason to be afraid, or to doubt themselves, or to feel uncomfortable or unwelcome.

But really I think it’s this:

When we welcome a child in Jesus’ name, we get a glimpse of how God sees us.

Young, blissfully ignorant, precious.

So that even if we have wasted our time in the kind of egoism and boasting that the disciples practiced that day, even if we wasted most of lives doing so, we can see that God regards this in the same way that we regard a child making a boast.

“I’m the smartest, I’m the fastest, I’m the strongest, I’m the best”

When a child makes these kinds of boasts we don’t get angry. We don’t hate them for their boasting. We love them, we love them all the more, because only a child can carry on like that, and that kind of innocence is hard not to love.

As we become adults, at some point we stop giving ourselves and each other the grace of that innocence. But I don’t think God ever does.

When God sees you working yourself to death for a little more money and a little more prestige. He doesn’t hate you for it.

When God sees you competing with yourself to be more than He has made you to be. He doesn’t condemn you for it.

When God sees you boasting and aggrandizing yourself, He doesn’t stop loving you.

God’s patience is unending. His love is eternal, and his grace and mercy are from everlasting to everlasting.

That day on the road.

That day when the disciples got it all wrong: when they were silent instead of faithful, when they were boastful instead of humble, Jesus corrected them but He did not give up on them.

The Good News of this day is that “it (truly) is not about us”, at least not in the way we usually think.

In life, we want our successes to be about us, we want our status and our accomplishments, and our material wealth to be about us, that’s why we guard these things so jealously.

And yet, if we want to learn freedom, *real freedom*, Jesus teaches us that we must become as one who welcomes a child. We must become children ourselves, those who stop insisting on our own greatness by accepting the God who already loves more deeply than our ego loves itself.

Friends, “It is not about us.”

And thanks be to God for that.

Amen.