

*In the name of God, who makes us, loves us, and keeps us. Amen*

Jesus and the disciples have returned home once again to Galilee, to the town of Capernaum, back to the relatively friendly region where they feel most at home. And when they had all settled down in a familiar house, maybe had some refreshment, kicked off their worn sandals, Jesus turns to the disciples and asks them what they had been so passionately discussing while on the road. Mark's Gospel says that they were arguing, arguing about who was the greatest. What were they thinking? Were they really saying to one another, 'I'm better than you, in fact I am the best'!? I think it may have been more like one of our monthly piano tuner meetings: Mind you, we are all a bunch of loners, and competitors, who by our pledge of loyalty to our Guild, promise to respect and not disrespect each other to the general piano-owning public. But, truth to tell, we each have our own beloved methods and techniques, which we each, in our heart of hearts, know for certain are better than those of the other guy. These techniques, for tuning, repairs, and regulation, were either handed down from a mentor or learned independently by trial and error; and we each think that we, when adhering faithfully to the special things which we do differently than anyone else, will achieve efficiency and quality beyond all of the others. Okay, that sounds arrogant, but in truth, we are expecting to achieve the greatest result by doing the best, namely our own individual and particular procedure.

So, perhaps the disciples aren't being quite so brazen as to exclaim, like Cassius Clay, that 'I am the greatest!', but just the same, when Jesus asks them about their disagreement, they have the good sense not to tell him. They are embarrassed that they would have the arrogance to dismiss one another as having lesser insight or skill in doing the master's work. Nonetheless, Jesus, already knowing what was afoot, and never missing the chance to capitalize on a 'teaching moment', takes a child in his arms and teaches that no matter how great a disciple might think he is, he is to humble himself enough to welcome even the most vulnerable and least significant in God's name. This child, who in that culture was far from being a contributing and valuable member of polite society, deserved to be *served* by the very ones who were by some other virtue called *important*. But Jesus seems to have something else on his mind, something which is a thorn in his side, something which he just can't let go. Perhaps you've noticed; it's clearly evident in the readings from Mark which we've heard the last few weeks. And we've talked about it before.

This week we heard, from Chapter nine, 'Jesus and his disciples passed through Galilee. He did not want anyone to know it; for he was teaching his disciples, saying to them, 'the Son of Man will be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him, and three days after being killed, he will rise again.' Last week, from chapter 8, we heard how Peter correctly recognizes Jesus as the Messiah, and then Jesus sternly orders the disciples not to tell anyone about him. The week before that, in chapter 7, we heard that Jesus entered a house in the region of Tyre, and did not want anyone to know he was there. Yet he couldn't escape notice and a gentile woman came and bowed down at his feet. And on a Sunday some weeks ago, in chapter 6, We heard that the apostles gathered around Jesus, and told him all that they had done and taught. And he said to them, 'Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while.' For many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat. And they went away in the boat to a deserted place by themselves. But many people saw them going and recognized them, and they hurried there on foot from all the towns and arrived ahead of them. Odd, isn't it, that Jesus, who has come into the world that God might be known by the world through him, craves such anonymity. This is what we have called the Marcan Secret. It is a feature of Mark's Gospel which cannot be adequately explained, though many have tried to make some sense of it, no one solution has ever gained a consensus for very long.

But one thing the Marcan Secret does reveal is the importance, the uniqueness, of Jesus' relationship with the disciples in these Bible stories. You may on occasion hear an acquaintance say that they attend a Bible-based church, implying that we are not. Well, feel free to inform them that each Sunday we read aloud three major passages from scripture, from the OT, from the NT Epistles, and one of the Gospels, we say together one of the Psalms, too, and that our liturgical prayers are generously sprinkled with Bible quotes. In our Episcopal way, we hear a lot of Bible each week. And did you know that when I was ordained, like every other ordinand, I was required to testify before the Bishop that I believe that the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments are the Word of God and contain all things necessary to salvation? And, as can be seen in our ceremony, we give high priority to the Gospel readings themselves. As we sing, the Lay Eucharistic minister, following the processional cross, carries and elevates the Gospel Book in the midst of the congregation, whereafter we say a special proclamation before and after the reading. If I asked you, considering all the

Bible we hear each week and how seriously we take it, if I asked you what the Gospels are about, how would you answer? You might say that the Gospels are the Good News about Christ, and include Jesus' teachings and narratives about his life and times. And, of course, you would be right. But the Gospels are also, perhaps just as importantly, the stories of the disciples and the other key followers of Jesus.

The Marcan Secret permits us to take a look into the private lives of Jesus and the disciples. And, think about it...who wrote the Gospels? Jesus is featured, sure, but he didn't write them. Now, we don't think that the remaining eleven disciples were directly involved with the publishing of these texts, either, but the stories included were ones told over and over by them during the first generation following Jesus' death and Resurrection. The Gospels are indeed collections of the information the disciples wanted us to remember...about Jesus and about them. And, God bless them, when they told these stories, they didn't puff themselves up. They weren't reluctant to reveal that they were ordinary, unsophisticated fishermen and tradesmen, that they were headstrong jerks who argued among themselves, that they were cowards who, as we read today, were afraid to ask Jesus what he meant about death and resurrection. They weren't reticent about admitting that they often asked stupid questions and didn't catch on right away. The stories that they chose especially to preserve from the three years they spent with Jesus are ones which describe their formation, their fitful formation from ignorant neophytes to leaders of the Christian faith. It is as if they had taken a typical three-year seminary course, with Jesus as their instructor, mentor, and spiritual director.

He taught them some scripture, particularly how to interpret the ancient prophets, he taught them Biblical History 101, some social justice courses, especially about the value of the poor and children and women. There were courses in theology, where he taught them about the nature of God, some liturgy, too, especially how the temple application of the Torah had been distorted to be regulations rather than the gift God intended it to be, and he probably helped them brush-up on their Hebrew and Greek, too. He taught them how to preach, how to plan mission trips, and how to convert the pagans. A well-rounded seminary curriculum. He took them on field trips, like the one we heard about last week to Caesarea Philippi, which was a new Roman city up on the seacoast, where they could spend some time at the beach, and see firsthand a true pagan society. At the entrance to that city was a grotto dedicated to the Roman god Pan. The Marcan Secret, the fact that Jesus needed some anonymity among the crowds, may well have been to provide time for teaching the disciples the skills they would need to carry on the work.

Which begs the question, was Jesus' work primarily about the formation of his closest followers? You may recall that after his baptism by John the Baptist in the Jordan River, the Holy Spirit drives him into the wilderness for some six weeks, a kind of Lenten experience, where he begins to sort out the meaning of his identity and what to do about it. He discovers he has the power to do many things, the very power and blessing of God Almighty. He enters a deep period of discernment. He is tempted to use that power to turn stones, of which there are plenty, into bread to feed the world. He is tempted to make himself king of all the nations, that he might defeat oppressors and bring peace to the world. Such temptations, he discovers are distractions from what he discerns as his true mission. Such temptations, he realizes, would be the easy way out. He calls them the distractions of Satan. Some time later, his new friend, Peter, tempts him to take the easy way out of the crucifixion, and Jesus says (as we heard last week), 'Get behind me Satan! For your mind is on worldly things not heavenly things'. Through prayer and reflection, it seems that Jesus comes to the discernible conclusion that his mission as God's incarnate presence on this earth is to train up an army of saints whose wisdom and love will change the world. The great work of reconciliation will have to be done by humans if it is to be credible and sufficient.

So Jesus prepares his flock, his closest followers, to escort the Kingdom of God to Earth. He teaches them by word and deed, by lecture and example, by midrash and modeling. He chooses ordinary, unpretentious friends like us for his inner circle, or, rather, they choose him. We might wonder, though, what he thinks when he hears that each Christian church or denomination has been claiming that their peculiar manner of worshiping is better than any of the others. How might he react when he discovers that any one church proclaims to be the greatest and most faithful among all the others? Well, he might, once again, raise up a nearby child and ask us just how we feel when we embrace and care for her, and bring a smile to that child's face. How does that make us feel? Are our hearts warmed? Are we suddenly filled with good cheer? Does it make a difference in our outlook when we, in that moment, make that child the center of the world and the focus of our attention? Does it inspire our sense of ministry? Well, if that's how we feel in the presence of children, then that, says Jesus, is how we should feel in our comings and goings with all God's creation. Having that feeling, that love, that passion for serving and paying attention, is how we *welcome* God into our daily lives. That spark of love, that joy, can make us each 'the greatest.' Amen.