

The Frustrations of Faith

Psalm 104:1-9, 24, 35c

Mark 10:35-45

I have pretty much given up on dealing with the frustration of the morning newspaper. The paper frequently arrives late. More often than not it is hidden in the hostas or out in the middle of the yard. This particular morning started out like most. I went outside, down the steps, out to the side walk and grabbed the newspaper out from the hostas. I was having a cup of coffee and looking at the paper when Michele yelled down, “why didn’t you wake me up. My first patient is at 8:30”. It was 8:30. I knew it was Wednesday, a day Michele left early for work, but I was thinking it was Thursday, a day she went in later. I had a meeting on Wed. morning that was typically on Thursday morning, so even though I knew it was Wed., I was thinking it was Thursday.

Trying to improve the situation, I thought I would make her a bagel for breakfast so she could take it on the go. Turns out we were out of bagels. I found some English muffins in the back of the fridge. They were moldy. Michele asked me to call the Clinic. I grabbed the phone and it fell off the wall.

I know these are minor frustrations and are inconsequential by comparison to things like losing your job, an unwelcome health diagnosis, conflicts at work or school, or any number of problems we

might face. Still, in any given day we encounter situations, experience people that evoke feelings of frustration and annoyance.

Thankfully, we can come to church on Sunday morning where none of that sort of thing happens. We like to think of church as a place where everything is where it should be, people are always doing what we would expect, nothing is out of place, the bulletins are done, the coffee is on, people are smiling. Maybe, once in a great while, there might be a little frustration or two you encounter at church, but as a general rule, when we come to church we are hoping and somewhat expecting this will be a frustration free zone.

Unfortunately, when frustration in church does happen, neither the people in the pews nor the everyday things that trouble and frustrate us, are likely to be the source of the problem. Jesus is the problem. Jesus is the one who is most likely to set off our frustration alarm.

We can all imagine the frustration caused by this Jesus way of life for young Desmond in our Story for All Ages we read this morning. Desmond has a new bike. He is excited to show the bike to his pastor, but on his way to church he encounters a group of mean looking boys who try to block his way and failing at that, call him a nasty name. After telling the pastor what the boys had done and said, the pastor says, “Can you forgive them?”

Talk of forgiveness is just about the last thing Desmond is interested in hearing. With fists tightened, Desmond says, “I will get

them back.” If someone has treated you badly, if you are feeling hurt or offended, expectations of forgiveness can be and off are a major source of frustration. That is clearly how it felt to Desmond. It was much more comforting and satisfying to think about ways of getting even.

But Desmond makes the mistake of going to church where he is reminded about a topic mentioned by Jesus with some frustrating regularity. It was Jesus who said, “*Judge not, and you will not be judged; condemn not, and you will not be condemned; forgive, and you will be forgiven.*” (Luke 6:37) In another time, Jesus puts the notion of forgiveness squarely within the context of worship. *And whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone, so that your Father also who is in heaven may forgive you your trespasses.*” (Mark 11:25) Peter tries to limit the frustration potential with all this forgiveness talk when he comes up to Jesus with a question, “how many times do we need to forgive someone before saying good enough? How about seven will that do”? To which Jesus responds, “70 times 7 would be more like it”. (Matthew 18:21,22).

If you are angry with someone, upset at what they have done or said, it is probably wise to stay away from Jesus. Jesus is like a stone in our shoe, a newspaper in the hostas, a phone falling off the wall. We are holding onto a grievance, perhaps considering ways to even the score a bit, and there is Jesus, right there in church, with this annoying and frustrating word about forgiveness.

If anyone knows about the frustration of spending time with Jesus and trying to follow this way of life Jesus proclaims it is the disciples. Many of the commentators I read talk about the disciples as slow learners. One author commenting on today's text from Mark says, "this text seems to be yet another example of the disciples – and not just James and John – as the fumbling, bumbling Keystone cops who simply don't get anything right." They just don't seem to get it. But, I think the disciples do get what Jesus is saying. It's much less a problem of failing to understand, and more a problem of being frustrated by what Jesus is asking of them. So often what Jesus says and does goes against our natural tendencies and quite often it goes against the dominant norms of our culture.

Today's frustrating experience for the disciples is a classic example. They know full well what it takes to get ahead in this world. All they have to do is look around them. The Roman Elite are essentially the 1%. They are the ones living in the big homes, driving the nicest cars, dining in the nicest restaurants. Their kids attend the nicest schools. They do everything first class. They are the first ones seated on the airplane, in those nice big wide seats with plenty of leg room. By the time the disciples board, heading to the cramped quarters of coach, the Roman elite are already sipping on a drink. Some of the religious authorities, who have made their peace with the Romans through various compromises, share a similar status.

Although the disciples have been traveling with Jesus and have themselves embraced Jesus intention to overturn this system, much like he did with the money changers in the temple, the disciples fail to realize how deeply influenced they are by this way of doing things. They expect that when this system of inequity is overturned, they will be the ones who get the first class seats. They will be the ones with access to the best colleges for their kids. They will be the ones eating at the nicest restaurants. "Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory."

For the disciples, this is how the world works. Those in positions of power, influence, authority do well. Everyone else scrapes by. It is a lesson learned from a very early age. Even though it runs counter to much of what Jesus is teaching and living, it is hard for the disciples, it is hard for us to imagine it functioning any differently.

One of the key teachings of the Antiracism Study Dialogues Circles led by Okogyeamon is that racism is learned at a very early age and is encoded in art, music, literature, the telling of history, all types of subtle reinforcements of which we become largely unaware. It is a message that says white is superior to every other racialized skin tone. Racism goes against our deepest Christian values, but it stays alive because like the disciples we fail to recognize what a deep influence it continues having on us.

To us in the know, the disciples often look like dunderheads, keystone cops and we wonder, how can they be so oblivious as to ask Jesus for a privileged spot when he comes into his glory? Their apparent ineptitude is the very same thing with which we struggle every time this compassionate way of life Jesus proclaims runs up against the way of life with which we are so familiar and which we have adopted as our own.

The other disciples hear about James and John's effort at getting first class seats with Jesus and they are angry. Jesus response to them makes clear the ten disciples are angry because they have been out maneuvered. Like James and John the other ten have grown up with the very same values, the very same approach to how one gets along in the world. They are living by the rules of the game, doing what one needs to do if you hope to get ahead. Greed, selfishness, hatred, celebrating the humanity of some groups, dismissing the humanity of others, a reluctance to forgive, a desire to put oneself above all else are like invasive species that find their way into the community of faith. We are guided by these values, we are influenced by these dominant cultural norms. None of us are immune, not even the disciples, not even those of us in the church.

Then along comes this frustrating Jesus and he says, *You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. But it is not so*

among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many." This is no admonition for those who have been forced into places of servitude to be kept in a position of powerlessness. Rather this is an invitation by Jesus for all of us to claim a different type of power, one based on caring, love, compassion, forgiveness, and generosity made possible by the presence of God. Jesus knows we can be better, we can do better, we have the potential to be all that God calls us to be.

I am hoping your paper was on time this morning and left right where you expect it to be, everyone gets to where they need to be on time, there is no moldy food in your fridge, no phone falls off the wall. But if you have come to church today, hoping for a frustration free zone, than you have probably come to the wrong place. Jesus is a source of constant frustration, because Jesus trusts as we are invited to trust the power of God's love to be at work in our lives, in our community and in our world.

Psalm 104:1-9, 24, 35c

For the Psalmist, creation is a constant reminder of the mystery, the glory and the wisdom of God. The Psalmist looks at the beauty of creation, the heavens, the waters, the earth, the wind, the mountains and the valleys, as constant reminder of God's creative presence.

Bless God, O my soul. O God my God, you are very great. You are clothed with honor and majesty, wrapped in light as with a garment. You stretch out the heavens like a tent, you set the beams of your chambers on the waters, you make the clouds your chariot, you ride on the wings of the wind, you make the winds your messengers, fire and flame your ministers. You set the earth on its foundations, so that it shall never be shaken. You cover it with the deep as with a garment; the waters stood above the mountains. At your rebuke they flee; at the sound of your thunder they take to flight. They rose up to the mountains; they ran down to the valleys to the place that you appointed for them. You set a boundary that they may not pass, so that they might not again cover the earth. O God, how manifold are your works. In wisdom you have made them all; the earth is full of your creatures. Bless God, O my soul. Praise be to God!

Mark 10:35-45

The Gospels never hesitate to show the weakness of the disciples, because the Gospel writers know that all of us share the very same struggles of faith. In our lesson today, we encounter the awkward situation of James and John asking for a special favor from Jesus. The disciples in turn are angered because they didn't think of it first. Jesus frustrates all of them, by telling them his invitation is to an altogether different way of living.

James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came forward to him and said to him, "Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you." And he said to them, "What is it you want me to do for you?" And they said to him, "Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory." But Jesus said to them, "You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?" They replied, "We are able." Then Jesus said to them, "The cup that I drink you will drink; and with the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized; but to sit at my right hand or at my left is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared."

When the ten heard this, they began to be angry with James and John. So Jesus called them and said to them, "You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many."