

Grace to the Humble

Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost [Proper 20b] September 23, 2018

James 3:13-4:10

Mark 9:30-37

³⁰ They went on from there and passed through Galilee. And he did not want anyone to know, ³¹ for **he was teaching his disciples, saying to them, “The Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men, and they will kill him. And when he is killed, after three days he will rise.”** ³² **But they did not understand the saying, and were afraid to ask him.** ³³ And they came to Capernaum. And when he was in the house he asked them, “What were you discussing on the way?” ³⁴ But they kept silent, for on the way they had argued with one another about who was the greatest. ³⁵ And he sat down and called the twelve. And he said to them, “If anyone would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all.” ³⁶ And he took a child and put him in the midst of them, and taking him in his arms, he said to them, ³⁷ “Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me, and whoever receives me, receives not me but him who sent me.”

In the Name of Jesus.

“God opposes the proud,”

says James,

“But [God] gives grace to the humble.”

[James 4:6]

This is not James the Apostle, but James the brother of our Lord.

“Humble yourselves before the Lord,”

says James,

“and he will exalt you.”

[James 4:10]

James wrote his letter to the Church around the year 50AD, about 20 years after our Lord Jesus was crucified, then resurrected, then he ascended to Heaven.

About twelve years after writing his letter to the Church, James was dead. He died in Jerusalem. According to the historian Eusebius, the Sadducees and the Pharisees took James up to the Temple and after a show-trial in which James was given the opportunity to publicly denounce Jesus as the Christ, they threw James down from the Temple pinnacle, and when he didn't die from that, they stoned him, until finally a laundry-man did him in by beating him with a club.

And so ended the life of James, the brother of our Lord. He had written to the Church, *“God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble,”* and, *“Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you.”*

Our world does not and cannot understand the Lord. Our world is about the business of who is in front, who is number one, who is excelling, who is effective, who is fulfilling all the projections and forecasts.

The disciples on the way to Capernaum were speaking among themselves. When Jesus asked what they had been discussing, they gave no answer, because they had been arguing about who was the greatest. [Mark 9:34]

They knew the way of the world. It's the way we all think. We all share the same sinful flesh. And we expect God to be the same way. He's the big guy. The one with all the power. The power to create, the power to uphold creation, the power to bring justice and exact vengeance, the power, finally, to kill.

If the world knows anything about God, it's that he's the One with all the power. So you better figure out how to appease him, how to get your will aligned with his will, how to change your life so that it looks more like his so-called plan for your life, how to give yourself over to him and call him into your heart, so that, at the end of the day, the big guy with all the power won't be angry and kill you.

None of which God the Son is the least bit interested in showing to anyone, or demanding from anyone.

When God the Son comes in the flesh to be with people, whom he himself, along with his Father, created, when Jesus walks among sinners, he isn't coming among them to talk about his power, or demand changed lives, or to bring fear and despair before Almighty God, but he is coming among them to say,

“The Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men, and they will kill him. And when he is killed, after three days he will rise.”

[Mark 9:31]

When God comes into the flesh to reveal himself, to show sinners how he wants to take care of them, his talk is not of his power, but of his self-chosen humility.

The title “Son of Man” is Jesus standing in the place of all mankind. Everything that belongs to every generation, every language and nation, every tribe and family—everything that belongs to all mankind, the sin, the guilt, the shame, the disease, the fear, the brokenness, the hurt and pain, everything that belongs to you and me and all humans of all generations, it has all been brought to one point, to the point of Jesus, he takes it, it is accounted to him, it belongs to him in its fulness, he is the stand-in for all mankind: the Son of Man.

So the Son of Man, standing in for us, gives himself over to an evil show-trial, to be humiliated, and to be put to death, even to death on a cross.

But in that, he made us his. If he is Son of Man, standing in for every sinner, then he has made us children of God, standing before the Father in his righteousness.

If he sees our arrogance, our arguing with each other, as his disciples argued about their own greatness, about who is number one, then he has clothed us in his humility, standing us before his Father in meekness, and before one another not to exert control, but to give gifts.

Our world does not and cannot understand a Lord who desires to bring not judgment, but forgiveness, not intimidation, but gifts.

Our world understands the language of “be number one,” “be effective,” “be a winner,” “fulfill all potential,” and here is Jesus, coming in humility, giving himself over to death, coming lowly, meek, and generously giving gifts.

And we belong to Jesus.

So, if we belong to Jesus, if we rejoice in his meekness, humility, and generosity, then what does that mean for how we live as Christians?

Why would we tell a son, “Strive for excellence in your math class, put in the work and do the best you possibly can,” if we are also telling him, “Our Lord Jesus comes not to be the greatest, but to be humiliated”?

Why would we tell a daughter, “Work hard practicing your violin. Excel in your work, and set a goal to make it into the symphony,” if we are also teaching her, “Our Lord Jesus comes not seeking the highest place, but to serve all as a lowly servant”?

Why would we tell a college student, “Pursue excellence in your studies. do the best research you possibly can, write the best paper you are able to write, fulfill your potential,” if we are telling that same student, “Jesus, your Lord, came to impress no one, but came sitting on the back of a donkey in order to ride into Jerusalem to be spit upon”?

For that matter, why would we tell any Christian to do a good job? Do good work at your business, expand your market. Strive to meet your company’s goals; do work to please your boss; pursue effectiveness in your work with fellow employees,” if we are telling that same Christian, James belonged to Jesus, and his life ended when evil men threw him from the Temple pinnacle and beat him to death, yet he was honored by Jesus, and you belong to that same Jesus.” So why not instead say to the fellow Christian, “Just show up, do the minimal, let yourself have no regard for improving, you belong to Jesus, and he knows how to suffer?

We teach the young man to strive for excellence in his classwork, we teach the young woman to pursue superiority in her music, not because they, as those who belong to the Lord, should want to be number one or be superior. Rather, we teach them to strive for excellence because, this is the way we serve our neighbor.

The young man or woman studying math, is this not a way for him to use his gifts in service to neighbor? Is he or she not learning math except to be able to use it to pursue a degree in engineering, or perhaps a career in medical sciences, or to run a cash register?

The student learning music, is that not a great service to neighbor to be able to provide excellent music?

The diligence learned in practicing for sports or for dance, is this not diligence that will serve a person in whatever vocations he or she later finds by which to serve neighbor?

Jesus came not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.

He ransomed us. He now sets us as his servants to the church, to our families, to our neighbor. We work diligently, we pursue excellence, we try to do our best, not to build up ourselves, but to let ourselves use our gifts in the best ways to help and serve our neighbor.

And when we do find that we have used our gifts not to serve our neighbor in humility, but to build up ourselves, that we have used our gifts not to give generosity and kindness, but to set ourselves up in arrogance, we hear our Lord's Word:

"But [God] gives grace to the humble. Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you."

[James 4:10]

We come before him humility. For he is the one who humbled himself for us, and we belong to him. He gives the gift of repentance and faith. We come to him in this gift of repentance. He hears our sin, and he gives grace. He hears our shame, and he covers us with his honor. He forgives. He cleanses. He exalts.

In the Name of Jesus.