

SEVENTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST | SEPTEMBER 19, 2021

JEREMIAH 11:18-20 | PSALM 54 | JAMES 3:13-4:3, 7-8a | MARK 9:30-37

There's a way of reading scripture called Ignatian Contemplation. Ignatian Contemplation is a practice where you imagine yourself embedded in the story. You meditate on how you would feel, how you would act, what you would say. When people do Ignatian Contemplation and imagine what they would tell Jesus, they're often very profound things. My concerns. My hopes. My fears. When we imagine being around Jesus, we see ourselves as serious, respectful, and reverent.

Ignatian Contemplation is fine and good, but it's also a little bit funny. Because the way we think we would act around Jesus often bears little resemblance to the way people actually act around Jesus in the gospels. Today's reading is a good example.

The disciples are walking with Jesus to Capernaum, and instead of talking to Jesus about what his parables mean or why Jesus keeps talking about his death or what that whole Transfiguration thing was all about, they're having a private conversation amongst themselves. They can't stop talking. But when they get to Capernaum and Jesus nonchalantly asks them what they were so busy talking about, they go silent. Suddenly they have nothing to say at all.

The word for silence here, *σιῶπαο*, suggests a kind of embarrassment. Not a silence of contentment or peace and quiet but a silence meant to hide something you don't want to talk about. Thankfully Mark, our omniscient narrator, fills us in. "On the way they had argued with one another [about] who was the greatest."

And it's easy to understand why. In the world of the New Testament, there were hierarchies that informed your relationships with other people. Rankings of power and status and influence. Men here, women there. Roman citizens here, non-citizens there. Rich here, poor there. Adults here, children there. And those hierarchies are present not just at some meta cultural level but in virtually every relationship. Even in this group of twelve men who are—at least from our perspective—basically the same, people start looking for a way to sort themselves out.

And it isn't so different for us. Philosopher Agnes Callard calls it the "Importance Game."¹ Those subtle little ways we communicate our importance to one another to get a sense of what the hierarchy is and how we should relate to each other. Who is the one in a position of power here? Who gets to make the decisions? Who is the greatest?

Our striving for greatness—or, let's be modest, importance—has two defining features. First, we justify our importance through our accomplishments. We make a claim on our place in the hierarchy and then marshal up a bunch of resources to bolster our argument for why we belong there. It could be a set of talents or skills. It could be financial resources or prestigious degrees. We lay claim to a position and then justify why we belong there. And if that language of justification sounds familiar, there's a reason for that.

Second, our striving for greatness is competitive. It's zero-sum. For us to achieve greatness, someone else has to get taken down a peg. For us to win, somebody else has to lose. There can only be one college on top of the US News rankings. There can only be one nicest home in the neighborhood. There can only be one valedictorian of your class. And if it's not you, it's going to be someone else. So play to win. And if you can't win, try to make others lose.

And all that self-justifying and competition works well enough in the short run. But in the long run, it starts to wear you down. It makes you obsessed with credentials and paranoid about the

¹ Agnes Callard, "Who Wants to Play the Status Game?" The Point Magazine, January 16, 2020, <https://thepointmag.com/examined-life/who-wants-to-play-the-status-game-agnes-callard/>.

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success of others. There always has to be more evidence to present or more people to be wary of. No wonder the flipside of importance is anxiety.

We probably like to think that we can leave those beliefs behind when we enter a community of faith. But habits die hard. We still seek to justify ourselves, to give our experience and concerns authority, by citing how long we've been around here for and how much money we give. Like the disciples, we often talk about "important" members of our community. But if someone ever asked us what makes them important, we'd probably be silent.

And even equally dispiriting is the assumption that we are in competition with other members of the body of Christ. There are few things more disheartening than hearing people speak of our partner congregations as if we are in a zero-sum relationship with one another. As if someone being transformed by the good news in a community that isn't our own makes us worse off.

Mark's Jesus tells us that when we bring those self-justifying and competitive dynamics into our community of faith, they become not merely corrosive over the long run but immediately self-defeating. Because there's an opportunity cost to all that self-justifying competitiveness. All this time the disciples spend arguing with each other about this meaningless hierarchy is time that they could have spent being shaped and transformed by Jesus. In today's reading and in life, it's when people start arguing about their greatness that they stop paying attention to what's actually important.

Jesus gives us a better way to live. Jesus advises, "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all." Jesus doesn't buy into the idea that we have to prove our worth with acts of power and hoarding of status. And Jesus doesn't believe that we succeed through others' failure. We become powerful not when we win a meaningless struggle but when we divest from the games of competition and systems of power that pull us apart from one another.

No, Jesus sees everything through the cross and invites us to do the same. It is precisely by taking his place among the last and the least that Christ shows us what it means to be powerful. Instead of marshalling credentials and justifying his ministry, Jesus offers himself freely. And instead of seeking to displace others to achieve success, Christ comes alongside us.

Jesus sees everything through the cross and invites us to do the same. That what dies on the cross is not simply Christ but our own striving for importance and machinations for power. And what is raised up is not simply Christ but our own lives of service and witness. God gives us power from the bottom up. Greatness through service. Success through failure. Life through death.

That cross-centered way of life is a gift. It doesn't depend on our own achievements and striving and grasping after importance. It is given to us by God. That's what it means to be justified by grace. That you don't need to spend life collecting all these accomplishments to make yourself worthy of love and respect. You don't need to justify yourself.

And that cross-centered way of life is open. It's non-competitive. You don't need to move anyone out of the way to get closer to God. In fact, Jesus says, it's just the opposite. "Whoever welcome one such child in my name welcomes me." And on the cross, Christ welcomes all.

What does that cross-centered way of life look like? It looks like our gathering together at table. What do you need to justify your place here? Nothing. No degree. No money. No class. No ID. You are here not because you deserve to be here, but because God has invited you. And who do you need to get out of the way? No one. This is not a zero-sum table where someone's gain means your loss. In the body of Christ, the flourishing of others nourishes our experience.

That's the life Christ gives all of us and empowers us to create in the world. Life on earth as it is in heaven. Life in the world as it is at table. Life through the cross, from the bottom up.

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