

18th Sunday after Pentecost
Sermon 9.23.18
Scripture:

James 3:13-4:3, 7-8

Who is wise and understanding among you? Show by your good life that your works are done with gentleness born of wisdom. ¹⁴ But if you have bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not be boastful and false to the truth. ¹⁵ Such wisdom does not come down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, devilish. ¹⁶ For where there is envy and selfish ambition, there will also be disorder and wickedness of every kind. ¹⁷ But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy. ¹⁸ And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace for those who make peace. Those conflicts and disputes among you, where do they come from? Do they not come from your cravings that are at war within you? ² You want something and do not have it; so you commit murder. And you covet something and cannot obtain it; so you engage in disputes and conflicts. You do not have, because you do not ask. ³ You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, in order to spend what you get on your pleasures...Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. ⁸ Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you.

Mark 9:30-37

They went on from there and passed through Galilee. He did not want anyone to know it; ³¹ for he was teaching his disciples, saying to them, "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." ³² But they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him. ³³ Then they came to Capernaum; and when he was in the house he asked them, "What were you arguing about on the way?" ³⁴ But they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another who was the greatest. ³⁵ He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all." ³⁶ Then he took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms, he said to them, ³⁷ "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me."

I row. Many of you know this. Most mornings, I'm on the water somewhere. When I row in the Berkshires, I'm usually in a single on Lake Onota in Pittsfield; and when I'm in a single, I'm usually listening to music.

It's rare that a rower would do this. You have to be able to hear when you're out there, even when you're not in a crew boat, even when you're not out there with a coach. Even when you don't expect to have anyone say anything to you at all, it's important to be able to hear in case someone needs to say something to you and needs you to hear. You're facing backwards in a rowing shell, and though you turn to look ahead every few strokes, it's easy to miss something that might be in your path.

Once a fisherman hollered out to me, "I'm here. Not sure you see me." I hadn't seen him, and I thanked him for alerting me. We have friendly fisherman on Lake Onota for the most part.

In some places, fishermen would rather see you sink than be out there on the same water with them, even though rowing doesn't disrupt fish. I've had whole schools surrounding me while I row, coming to the surface, sinking back below, seeming undisturbed by my slipping along. I heard that fisherman because I only had one ear bud in.

That's how I do it, with just one ear bud in.

I have song lists according to how many strokes per minute I want to do. The lists I rely on most are for 20 strokes per minute, and 22. That rate is good for long, steady-state rows. I also have playlists for 24 strokes per minute, and 26, 28, even 30 and 32 for practicing sprints. The beat keeps me going. In a single, it's too easy to convince yourself that you're tired—or it is for me at least.

One song on my playlist for long, steady state rowing is called "Happy People," and it skips along on a bouncy twang, a country song that's crossed over into pop. These are the lyrics: "Happy people don't cheat. Happy people don't lie. They don't judge, or hold a grudge, don't criticize. Happy people don't hate. Happy people don't steal 'cause all the hurt sure ain't worth all the guilt they feel. If you want another secret, can't buy it, gotta make it. You ain't ever gonna be it by takin' someone else's away. Never take it for granted. You don't have to understand it. Here's to whatever puts a smile on your face: whatever makes you happy, people."

It's fitting that I listen to this while rowing because rowing puts a smile on my face. Not always, mind you. Sometimes it's frustrating. Sometimes it's painful. But it makes me happy—and I'm not entirely sure I'm okay with that.

This is the second time Jesus is said to have said to the disciples anything about what suffering awaited him. "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." The disciples didn't understand what he was saying, the story goes on to tell us, which should come as no surprise. I mean, do we understand it? We who've known all along where this story was headed, we who haven't just heard this twice but countless times—do we understand it? Even if you're new to church life, surely you knew that Christ would be crucified. Jesus would be killed, which makes him a bizarre figure to follow as savior. And yet we all came through the doors this morning sure of this strange feature in the story. Unlike the disciples who started off with Jesus with a very different set of assumptions than we did with him, do we though understand any better than they?

I fear that we're living through a master class in self-giving devotion, in self-sacrifice.

I believe Christine Blasey Ford. I suspect hearing her testimony will have me believing her even more, but maybe not. Maybe she won't be a credible witness. Meanwhile, the story she tells is credible indeed. I went to prep school. I know some Brett Kavanaughs. I was never in the position to be at their mercy, both because circumstances didn't unfold that way for me and because I was (am) a cautious person. I didn't drink in high school, and I didn't do drugs, and I chose not to out of self-preservation, which put me on the outside of a lot of social circles that I'm only glad to have been outside now as an adult.

As for the actual Brett Kavanaugh, he was a teenager then, which means his behavior shouldn't be determinative of his adult life. His response to all this, though, should be. And his response has not impressed me except to convince me further that this is indeed a plausible scenario and that he's unused to being held to much account. There's some worry that an uncorroborated accusation shouldn't destroy a man's life. But we're not talking about destroying his life, just about not giving him a lifetime appointment to a most exclusive and prestigious post—one in which character really counts, and the character I'm coming to see in Kavanaugh strikes me as neither wise nor just.

As for her, she came forward because she felt an increasingly pressing civic duty—that the man being considered for this crucial position is someone she had particular knowledge of, which her suspecting he wasn't worthy to sit in judgment of our society. But she proceeded with that suspicion asking for guidance about this. Again, she wasn't trying to ruin a man's life with damning stories from another time. She was weighing whether what she knew was pertinent to this developing situation—until it got out of her control.

As to her hesitation, that's makes sense. Coming forward wouldn't necessarily bring him to humility, but it would overwhelm her life until it wasn't even her life anymore. And now her worst fears are realized. She's had to move out of her home, taking her family with her, in fear of her safety, facing even death threats—all because of civic duty. She wasn't a woman scorned, though she has every right to have been. She was a patriot. She's a sacrifice, which she herself offered up, though in the hope that we wouldn't actually insist upon her life as she knew now to be over—though we did. We have.

I will pay attention to this hearing, and I might be surprised by it. I might have my mind changed. Or I might feel like I'm watching the trial Jesus knew he would soon face—before unsympathetic judges who'd already decided about him and about the course of action they would take, though the mob would help: "Crucify him. Crucify him."

Power protects itself, conscripting even the powerless to do the grunt work of that.

Power seduces. It's so hard to see power as anything other than justified, and because of itself. The guy in the corner office deserves the corner office. The woman with the walk-in closet deserves all those Louboutins. (It's a kind of shoe. I learned about them on a TV show on the CW Network.) The kids in prep school worked hard to get there, and the ones without clean water aren't showing enough gumption. Really, it's so hard to see power from the perspective of the gospel. It's so hard to see that gaining power isn't the point and that using what power you have to serve for the sake of the gospel *is* the point. Using what power you have for the sake of a common good, for the sake of building up the beloved community: that is the point. And you can only do that if you're willing to give it up, to sacrifice it.

That is the point and purpose of power: that you use it in service of love and justice, risking even that you might lose it. That is the point.

We must learn that here, because I don't know where else they're teaching it.

I worry it's nowhere else.

The disciples' argument was apparently embarrassing to them. The argument they were having as they went along the way, following Jesus teaching while he passed through Galilee: they were quiet about it once Jesus' notice of it became clear. "What were you arguing about on the way?" The story tells us they were silent for they had argued with one another about who was the greatest among them, which suggests they were embarrassed, which suggests they knew they were getting it wrong.

It also underscores the persistence of that sort of thinking—that greatness is the thing to go after, even greatness at being humble, which is quite a trick. Here I thought the humble brag was a new invention, a product of this ironic age. Apparently, it's been around as long as humans and power have. "But I'm the one who was best at pouring out grace upon grace. I poured out *so much grace!*"

It sounds like a clergy conference.

I joke. Sort of.

If this impulse is so natural then, what will be the countervailing force to that? If it's an almost instinctual drive, to go after power, if not to accumulate it yourself then at least to be in close relationship with the one who does have it, how will cultivate a counterbalance to that?

We're two generations into a social experiment. The church is fading in influence, the gospel is less known in the Western world since the inception of the West, biblical literacy is a thing of the past. Meanwhile, we're as free as any people in any society has ever been, we're wealthy beyond what could be imagined even a few decades ago, we're powerful and influential in ways once conceivable only in science fiction, and we're individualistic in our self-conception that makes the unmooring from traditional teaching and practice a not simply notional thing, but is a socio-historical phenomenon that is perhaps playing out in real ways. We're evermore alert to our rights, even ready to fight for those rights when we suspect they're being violated, but we hardly ever hear talk of what our responsibilities are, wouldn't even know how to have that conversation. For who could possibly say what my responsibility, as person A, is to you, person B? Who has the authority to say that definitively, and by what standard is that arbiter deciding that? No: I have no responsibility to you. You're no one to me.

On the other hand, as we've watched so many in power unravel or be brought low, I've had lots of occasion to think how frightening it would be to have no one in my life in a position to correct me, to hold me to account, or simply to tell me "no." There's hardly anything as frightening as a person beyond reproach.

But it's also had me wonder if we're all somewhat so? I mean, who (if anyone) corrects you, and on what terms and by what standard? Is this something we can even conceive of doing to someone else, or have done to us?

I've had two people flip out—*flip out!*—at theaters because Tobias has kicked the back of their seat. Unable to turn and say simply to him, "You know, you're kicking the back of my seat. Could you please stop that?" unable in one case to accept his apology and let it go, both stemmed (it seemed) from the assumption that you can't request something of someone, or correct someone, but must instead gird yourself for a fight. When one of these then attacked me for having failed in my job as a mother, I was ready for a fight too—when what I'd have appreciated is a fellow grown-up helping me raise my kid.

Sheela and I have been sharing an appreciation for a new book out, one that she read and reviewed for the *Berkshire Edge*, one I've heard a lot about in author interviews and reading book reviews (like Sheela's!) and which I mentioned in a sermon a few weeks ago. Anand Giridharadas wrote *Winners Take All: The Elite Charade of Changing the World* by which he indicts our acceptance of the fact that the very billionaires who practiced a ruthless version of capitalism, lobbied for "tax reform" (and built up archipelagos of tax shelters) now seem to fancy themselves as the last best hope for humanity, embarking on charitable work that, though grand in terms of private dollars, only selectively address the problems their otherwise ruthlessness helped create—selectively and in many self-servingly.

"Doing good by doing well," is the catchphrase—that their investments of capital can pay dividends of more wealth for them and their fellow investors, while also providing social good for those lucky enough to be on the receiving end. See, it's a win-win scenario for both investors and for a world rife with problems. This means the government can stay out of it. Inventive charter schools in the world's most troubled neighborhoods, leadership training for the least advantaged youth, water supplied to places that are otherwise left out: see, we can do it without public infrastructure, without public-minded sacrifice.

But, wait, why would we do that? I mean, isn't it better to have a public library than to know that your neighbor on the top of the hill has a terrific private library and maybe he'll invite you over to loan you a book? Fingers crossed!

With this new mode becoming dominant, Sheela notes, "the smartest American college graduates... are aggressively courted by the Double Impact programs of the world. Giridharadas interviews several of them, [and writes of] one young woman [as an example], 'She asked herself what she could do, but not what people in her universe might already have done.'" In other words, the collective action, and shared sacrifice, by which were won voting rights, labor rights, and civil rights, "are nowhere on their radar." Now it's the "win-win" world of strategic investing, which means that, by joining with the charitable arm of Goldman Sachs or with the Bezos Family Foundation, these young recruits will "enjoy an enticing combination of making money, doing good, feeling virtuous, traveling the world, and gaining a catchy cocktail-party spiel." But what will be chiefly served in all this busy, do-gooding capitalism is the securing those with wealth and power with a means for further wealth and power.

I don't know if email can be exchanged in hushed tones, but if it can that's what Sheela and I were doing over the last week. Is it possible, we wondered as we wrote back and forth, that our sense that "win-win capitalism" is a deception, that sacrifice is really the only way to change the world, and that those who are used to winning are especially going to have to take a hit from time to time, though they will work mightily to avoid this: is it possible that we came to believe this because of all the time we've spent with the likes of Jesus?

But we're not religious chauvinists, we backpedaled. We don't think about Christianity in such "the best way, the only way," "rah rah" terms. We're religious *liberals*, which means for us it's supposed to be "the cross or really whatever." Whatever makes you happy, people...

I spend a lot of time and thought measuring my many engagements in life, measuring them according to the standard of Christ. How does this or that measure up to my commitment to following Jesus? How does the way I spend my money measure up—and the ways I give some of that money away? How does my parenting measure up to the standard of the cross of self-giving love, and the work I do as pastor of this church? How does my voting in public elections hold to that high standard, and my interpreting of the news of the day? How does rowing measure up, a most indulgent pastime, and one I first learned to love in prep school of all places? I mean, might Frisbee instead hook me, or knitting caps for newborns at Fairview Hospital?

Again, I joke, sort of—because I'm not advocating a return to the strict Calvinism of our having to justify our every moment that we live and breathe in this life, but nor are we at risk of that. I am advocating a small dose of it, though: a tincture of iodine to detoxify a system.

Our system is toxic. Maybe that's always true, just ever made true in particular ways. So, if we who mean to follow Christ were such a tincture, or a thorn inside the jacket of someone's Zegna suit, or a pebble inside someone's Louboutin pump, or an appearance of justice on the low seat before the vaulted Senate panel, I'd be okay with that.

They might be too. Really, the good news of the victory of self-giving love might come as good even to those who've meant to outrun it or outspend it or sit above it or strive past the wandering band of fools who are the church. Who knows? They might be relieved to hear they can cease with the striving; they can simply love. Maybe.

We won't until we give it a try.

Thanks be to God.

