

Christ Episcopal Church

2 Emerson Street

East Norwalk, Connecticut 06855

Sunday, September 23, 2018

Proper 20 (B)

Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost

DRAFT

“How to be Number One”

8 and 10 AM Sermons

by the Rev. Joe Parrish

The Holy Gospel according to

Mark 9:30-37

Jesus and his disciples went on from there and passed through Galilee. He did not want anyone to know it; 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.” But they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him. Then they came to Capernaum; and when he was in the house he asked them, “What were you arguing about on the way?” But they were silent, for on

the way they had argued with one another who was the greatest. He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, “Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.” Then he took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms, he said to them, “Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.”

Lord, make us instruments of your love. Amen.

Barbara Lundblad, recently professor of homiletics at Union Seminary in New York wrote: “Children are sometimes at the bottom of the heap in Christian circles.... Before I was ordained, I was a [church] youth director in Minnesota. During those years there was a very popular program called ‘Basic Youth Conflicts.’ Huge crowds gathered in sports stadiums to hear how Christian families should be structured. Participants received a fat notebook with take-home tests and parental strategies.

One diagram was particularly memorable: ‘GOD’ was written at the top of the page. Beneath God’s name was the father symbolized by a Hammer, then a Chisel symbolizing the mother and at the bottom, unshaped Stones representing the children. The plan was clear: God directed the Hammer-father to tap on the Chisel-mother who would then shape the uncut Stones into beautiful children, jewels for the kingdom of God. The name of that program has been changed; hopefully they've also changed that diagram,” Rev. Lindblad concluded.

Emmanuel Katongole, preaching at Duke University's Chapel, said, "...conversation about pastoral ministry (seminary training) should not be focused on capacities and skills, whether the capacity to protect, to sacrifice for, to pray for or even to work for the child; it must be about 'receiving such a one as this.' This is also the greatest lesson that Jean Vanier, founder of the L'Arche communities for disabled, teaches us when he reminds us that what the poor, the weak and the disabled require of us is not so much to do things for them. 'It is

not so much to sacrifice on their behalf but to invite them to sit at the same table with us.””

The church I served in last year had an overflowing Christian preschool because it accepted special needs children along with all other children. Not segregating special needs children is a topic that needs a lot of further discussion and indeed much more forward thinking in our school systems.

I still recall from my first-grade class that beside our classroom were many special needs children my age who had

cerebral palsy and other disabilities. I never got to meet one of them.

I saw a cartoon by Doug Hall where a person is standing up in a Bible study of today's gospel and saying, "I don't want to be first or last, but I want to wallow somewhere in the middle." Maybe that is where many of us prefer, wallowing in the middle. And that's OK, maybe we don't feel the urge to lead or to just follow, but to contribute here and there a bit. Where we would like to go is to follow Jesus who was always out front, healing the sick, preaching to the poor,

comforting the afflicted. When we have the Holy Spirit with us, however, even though we don't 'feel' like we are that important or necessary, we are still carrying the seed of the power of God within ourselves. We have the light of Christ within us, and try as we may, it cannot easily be covered up. In fact, Jesus said not to put our lamp under a bushel basket but set in outside where the light and love of Christ can lead others to the peace and love of God. Many are searching for a better way for their lives. Jesus gives that better way.

Indeed, the first followers of Jesus were called ‘people of the way’. It was perhaps over thirty years later that the term “Christian” became to be the moniker of those who were already ‘people of the way’. So many are wandering in the darkness of sin and despair when they could be finding new peace and new hope in the Lord Jesus Christ. Let us be the light that helps them find their way in this dark and dreary world which does not yet know the love of God.

Pastor James Emery White, founding and senior pastor of Mecklenburg Community Church in Charlotte, North Carolina, asks, ‘...what defines a successful life? What does it mean for a life to have force, to have impact? What does it mean for a life to make a difference, to be significant, and to leave a mark for all of eternity? What gives your life force, strength, energy, power, and intensity?’

However, ‘What do we do to avoid giving up even a minute of our time? Do we scan the checkout lines at the grocery

store to find the shortest one? Do we eat fast food, not because it's good, or even because it's cheap, but because it's fast? Do we pull our car into another lane so we won't have to wait on a truck? Does green mean "go," and yellow mean "speed up"? How many decisions do we make simply based on whether it will save us time? Time is often everything to us.

‘Was Jesus saying there wouldn't be sacrifice involved? No. Was he saying we wouldn't sacrifice money or time? No. Was he saying serving is easy? No,

but he was saying that serving is worth it. What will come about in our life as a result is 100 times more than whatever we were doing before.

‘We will never give our self to something bigger than our self if we only see our self. And we will certainly never live the life Jesus lived if we don't see what's going on in this world. But those who have the life force of Jesus do.

The writer of Ephesians in Chapter 6:10-12 wrote: ‘God is strong, and God wants us to be strong. So, let us take everything the Master has set out for us,

well-made weapons of the best materials: [truth, justice, peace, faith, the love of Christ, and the word of God]. And put them to use so we will be able to stand up to everything the Devil throws our way. This is no afternoon athletic contest that we'll walk away from and forget about in a couple of hours. This is for keeps, a life-or-death fight to the finish against the Devil and all his angels' (Ephesians 6:10-12, The Message).

‘We all want a life that makes a difference. We all want a life of

significance. It comes one way: the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life away. That's the challenge for all of us. What will we do with our life? Would it be wonderful to have every Christian serving somehow, somewhere, for the cause of Christ? The cause is too great, the day is too dark, and time is too short to have anyone on the sidelines.'

Ashleigh Brilliant, an odd vestige of the seventies who scribbled his offbeat humor on hippie postcards, once penned: "All I ask of life is a constant and

exaggerated sense of my own importance.”

Toward the end of his life, Albert Einstein removed the portraits of two scientists--Newton and Maxwell--from his wall and replaced them with portraits of Gandhi and Schweitzer. He explained it was time to replace the image of success with the image of service.

Once I was observing a young girl and her mother admiring a church garden. The mother apparently told her daughter, ‘Isn’t it beautiful? God is everywhere.’ The little girl suddenly

started to jump up and down and asked her mom, ‘Am I jumping up and down on God?’ Her comment sent me into a theological quandary: is the little girl right? Is she jumping up and down on God? Well, sorry to say, it took me sometime to collect my thoughts on her profound question: was she jumping up and down on God. And the answer I came to was, “No, she was jumping up and down on God’s creation, not on God God’s self.” But can’t we see how literal the little girl was? Indeed, literally, she interpreted her mom to say God was not

only everywhere, but God was everything. But sometimes we are like that little girl, thinking that everything is God when only through the invisible things are actually how God speaks to us, in the kindness someone shows us, in the love we show a stranger, in the way we interact with those who are humble or poor. They are God's children. Those are the ones that we need to have concern for, of course, in addition to young children. But Jesus was making a point. We Christians are not sent out to minister to those who can care for

themselves but to those who need us to help them care for themselves. When we see how God has set us up as God's servants, then we will find how God can use us no matter whether we feel we can preach a sermon or sing a hymn or memorize a Bible verse. God comes to us through the most gentle of ways. Let us take the que from today's Gospel and welcome the ones God has sent to us, as those persons are coming to us as Christ. Let us treat one another with the utmost care and love so that we will welcome Christ into our midst in the last, the least,

the lonely, and the lost. Then we are serving as Christ served us by his sacrifice for us on the cross.

Amen.

Description:

God loves us as little children. Let us take that love and show it to others.

Tags:

Last, least, lonely, lost, child, love, little, Einstein, Newton, Maxwell, Gandhi, Schweitzer, disciples, invisible, everywhere, everything, time, fast, truth, justice, peace, faith, Christ, word, God, special, needs, preschool, Union, Seminary, Minnesota

St. John's Episcopal Church

61 Broad Street

Elizabeth, New Jersey 07201

The Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost:

Proper 20B

DRAFT

September 20, 2009

A Sermon by the Rev. Joe Parrish

“What Is God’s Plan for Your Life?”

The Holy Gospel according to

Mark 9:30-37

Lord, make us instruments of your love. Amen.

Years ago, in my first job as a clinical associate in a large pharmaceutical company, I was assigned to do a PERT chart of the development of a new pharmaceutical drug from its conception to the marketplace. I read a lot of books on how PERT charting had been used to produce the first US nuclear submarine, the Polaris, and learned the ‘lingo’ and concepts of PERT charting—also called

Critical Path Management or Critical Step Analysis by some. PERT, by the way, means Program Evaluation and Review Technique. This was seen as the way a complex process could be used to control various stages of development of something when each stage's outcome was variable and not able to be pinned down exactly. The value of PERT charts is that they point out where bottlenecks could occur and where to focus management attention in order to get the most efficient outcome. In the end, however, many of the process times are

estimated over favorably, and the PERT chart gives a too optimistic completion time. This is all a bit technical, but it is an insight of how corporations go through planning stages to make decisions about new products.

People have tried to arrange personal PERT charts for their lives, perhaps in more approximate ways, about getting married, having children, getting job promotions, buying houses, and so on. We like to feel we have some control on the various and sundry variables that we are faced with in life. But of course, the

variables in life are such that we generally flounder around more than we expect, and serendipity or missed opportunities take makes many of the plans we make worthless, and we have to begin again planning out our lives.

I read the other day that all humans have an innate thought about our end, but we suppress it because it causes us such fear; and if we don't suppress it, we become fearful people. That is part of the problem with planning out our life, we don't really want to face the fact that one day we will no longer 'be'. And if

you are like me, I'll put a great distance between now and the date I will no longer 'be', whether realistic or not.

That makes planning easier, but probably much less real and effective. The word, "now", overwhelms most of the plans we make. "Now" we need to do this or that. Some of us find the "now" of life is so exciting that we don't really think about the "later". That leads to unwanted illnesses, losses of fortunes, and missed opportunities later in life. When I went to seminary, many men came up to me and said they had always wanted to go to

seminary, but life had caught up with them and they never could make the commitment. Life does get in the way some of our heartfelt plans.

I think I am not in the minority of clergy people who have used the phrase, “God has a plan for our lives.” It probably has been used so much that we have trivialized the importance of God in our thinking about our own lives. We somehow think that in a blinding flash, God will give us some sign that will point us in one direction or another. Actually, but more rarely, do such signs

occur, and when they do, we have to step back a bit to test the sign to be sure it's not something we may have concocted out of our own desires. One part of that process may be to test the sign to see if it somehow is consistent with biblical teaching. Another question to ask is whether common sense would agree with such a sign, or are we just imagining it. A third test would be to seek the council of other Christians to see how they react to the sign. Another test may be to be sure the sign will lead to positive outcomes for others around us that we

love, and even for those we may not care that much about. And we need to ask, is that sign loving; does it express the love of God for the world and for us?

The Alpha course uses a slightly different approach in one of its lessons: “How Do I Make the Most of the Rest of My Life?” And that lesson notes we are “on stage” immediately in life. We are where we are because of what we did earlier in life. And we need to agree that although we would like to have a “dress rehearsal” for life, that rehearsal never really happens. We may think we can

follow some script that perhaps our parents worked out or wrote for us, and that could take us a bit into the future.

But at some point, our lives tend to drift dramatically away from our parents and guardians, and we have to ‘fend for ourselves’.

So if you find yourself in that position, beyond the script someone suggested for you, what then? Some acquire mentors to help them go beyond parental guidelines, and that often is good, but mentors only can help us so far, and then we are again on our own,

possibly trying to find another mentor and discovering how difficult that becomes later in life. There is a program that Episcopal clergy persons go through called, “Credo”, which functions somewhat in that manner, and it does have some good wisdom. But by and large, life is not so programmable, and it also is not infinite, so somewhere between what we need and what we can get is where our lives somewhat sputter along.

The Bible, and especially some of the Psalms, point over and again to

‘following God’s commandments’.

What those are, of course, are a bit debatable. The Pharisees of Jesus’ time had already discerned about 613 different commandments in Holy Scripture and were diligently trying to follow each of those commandments scrupulously. But Jesus rebelled against such ideas and noted that in order to fulfill all those commandments, the Pharisees had to ‘cut corners’, and among other things the Pharisees had done so much damage to the original intent of a given commandment that they

had missed the point of the commandment entirely. The Pharisees, for example, would assiduously tithe even the herbs in their gardens, but when it came to loving others, they ignored care for their own elderly parents when they should have been helping them. They were flesh and blood of their parents, but their artificial indulgence in the ‘commandment game’ pulled them away from observing the first two greatest commandments, to love God and to love their neighbor. And loving one’s neighbor was never interpreted as a

Pharisee loving his enemy. So strife arose, and life was never really joyful.

I read a eace (P-e-a-c-e) site on the internet this week that described how an Israeli Jewish woman and her Palestinian women neighbors would go together to a certain Palestinian shopping mall, a thing somewhat rare in Israel, and shop together, comparing prices, discussing what looked good ‘on’, and generally helping their families survive another season of shopping together. She recalled the shopkeepers shouting out in Hebrew, “Cheap today, expensive

tomorrow”. And, of course, that led to frenzied buying since no one wanted to pay a higher price. But somehow that catch phrase, “cheap today, expensive tomorrow” does express how we probably live our lives. It is cheaper to attend and graduate from high school today than to wait for several years in a somewhat menial job to get a GED in order to ‘get ahead’; and similarly for college—have you seen the poster of the ‘oldest college graduate’, a 95 year old grandmother who graduated recently: “Nola Ochs, who began taking college

classes more than 30 years ago, has become a celebrity on the campus of Fort Hays State University in Kansas, where she” graduated in May 2007 “with a degree in history.”

<<http://abcnews.go.com/GMA/story?id=3167970&CMP=OTC-RSSFeeds0312>>

She graduated alongside her 21-year old granddaughter. So never say never, I say!

So, what does Jesus want from your life? Does Jesus have a plan for you? Can you accept the sacrifice he may be

calling you to? Or is it too far from your own plans to do Christ's bidding?

Probably circumstances have changed from the time you made your life plan, and maybe today is the day you may need to rethink that plan and get it refocused into what Christ has in mind for you.

The disciples argued over who was the greatest, and Jesus said the servant is the greatest. And the disciples said, "Huh?" Actually that latter verse is strangely missing in the Bible, but I think that may be read 'between the lines'.

But Jesus didn't let his disciples off the hook, he took a young child into his arms and told them that "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me."

Do you think Jesus was limiting our services to just young children? Not likely. Jesus meant to welcome those who were child-like in their faith, the newcomers, the ones just putting their toe into the waters of belief, those we need to warmly welcome. And that

commandment was set down for the disciples, and for us, as to what God wants us to do with the rest of our lives: serve others, the helpless, the last, the least and the lonely. Serve the church as it does those ministries. Serve the world that needs to see servants of the Christ who pointed us the way to real greatness, through service.

I think the plans God has for our lives include more than just reading our Bibles every day and praying. I think God is simply using those common Christian devotional activities to get us ready for

more fantastic things to do to grow God's kingdom in our time and in our place. God has big plans for us, and God is challenging us to step up to these challenges by being more than we ever thought we could be as servants in God's world and for God's Kingdom.

Today we are accepting your financial plans in the form of Commitment Cards for 2009-2010. We have a delicious luncheon planned right after this service for whoever will complete a Commitment card for the coming fiscal year. But this is only a first step for us.

This is only a small initial action for us to do, but making a financial commitment to God's work is a movement in the right direction. And remember we are no longer limiting giving to the tithe any longer, since Jesus looked askance at tithers and encouraged us on to the fifty percent level, like little Zacchaeus, and indeed on to the hundred percent level like the young man who wanted to get into the Kingdom of God, and the widow who was extolled by Jesus as he saw her put in her last two coins. I actually observe that every

Sunday, as people, mostly in the 2:30 PM Vespers service, put in the offering plate everything in their pockets. We are blessed by those coins, believe me. And God has blessed us through their stewardship that has no bounds. But most of us today are giving from our excess. And we need to be challenged to move to a higher level, closer to God's kingdom.

What is cheap today may be expensive tomorrow. Buy low, sell high may be one way to put it, but really we want to be the very best instruments of

God's love in a large and threatening world. That is God's plan for us. So let us together here at St. John's do mighty deeds of service so the world can see Christ Jesus through us.

Amen.