

Pentecost 17-B
9/12/21 CTK

Mark 9:30-37

40,000 teenagers were sitting on the edges of their seats at a National Youth Gathering Atlanta, GA as Rob Bell, one of the key speakers that year, held up a vision of Jesus' first disciples, the twelve apostles, as young men – teenagers in fact - just like these kids at this gathering. This idea really electrified the audience. His case was simple: that historically, it would have accurate; that would have been about the age when a young man Jesus' day would continue his religious studies by finding the right rabbi and becoming his disciple.

Well, the kids at the convention loved this idea. It excited them no end to think that someone their own age, at their vulnerable time of life, with all the angst and uncertainty that come with adolescence, could follow Jesus so faithfully. Bell's theory would certainly explain a lot about the apostles' behavior in the gospels. Impulsively quitting their jobs to follow him; jumping into the sea after him and trying to walk on water like Jesus. That is the energy of youth.

Just listen to today's gospel reading again: "when Jesus asked them what they were arguing about on the way they were silent because they had argued with one another about who was the greatest!" After being with Jesus for almost three years, can you imagine? Like kids talking trash at a playground basketball game. "That's all you got? Let me show you. Talkin' 'bout who's the greatest." Just out of earshot of Jesus, or so they thought. Like kids.

Author Richard Rohr often writes about some the big, important differences between the first half of our lives – as children, teenagers and young adults - and the second half – as older, settled down, maybe with families of our own. In the first half of our live we have youthful energy and innocence on our side; our job is to prove ourselves, to show the world "who is the greatest", as we try to figure out who we are, how we fit in, build a framework for our ego, and set about to conquer the world. In the second half of our lives, he says, we have the benefit of some experience. We've learned some things about suffering and failure, about love and grace, and well, about who we really are in the bigger picture of God's creation. That's when we loosen up a little on our the need to dominate, to prove ourselves. We may even have earned a little wisdom to share with the younger ones as they come up.

Remember, Cassius Clay – “I am greatest!” This was a guy who as a young man was about as good at proving himself as anybody. But after he had been beat up a little by life (and good old Joe Frazier), after he had been Muhammed Ali for a while, he mellowed and became a much wiser and more gentle man. But he never lost that wicked sense of humor and that confidence. He just grew up.

In today’s gospel reading, the apostles had just come off a long, hard road trip with rabbi Jesus. They’d been up and down the Mediterranean coast, all the way to Phoenicia, and Caesarea, Mark tells us; they’ve been up on the Mountain of Transfiguration and then back down into the valley with its throngs of sick people. They were growing up fast. They had seen a lot of suffering, driven out demons, helped to feed thousands of people with a few loaves and fishes. They had had a vision of Jesus as the resurrected Christ, even confessed him to be the Messiah; and they had been crushed when Jesus had told them what the mission really was: for Jesus to be betrayed, crucified and in three days rise again. Three times he had told them that and they still hadn’t gotten it. Mark says “they didn’t understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him.” Like when the doctor tells you something you don’t want to hear: in one ear and out the other.

And so, yes, they were embarrassed that he had heard them blowing of steam in the childish argument about which of them was the greatest.

But like everything for Jesus, it’s a teaching moment. “Whoever wants to be first has to last of all and servant of all.” They’ve heard this kind of thing from him before and didn’t understand it then, either.

And then he gathers up a child who happens to be at hand. This is a really interesting little part of the story. We don’t hear anything about this child – how the child happens to be in this house where they are, the place where they all are staying back at Capernaum, the closest thing Jesus has to a home base. And we don’t know how old this child is – who knows, this child could be a toddler, but it could be someone as old as 11 or 12 – still a child but maybe not that much younger than these disciples themselves, if you buy Rob Bell’s argument.

Jesus gives this child a hug and says, “take a look – this is what you are really aspiring to. This is me.” Their teacher, their master, the great healer, a great prophet, the Messiah. This man, for whom they will nearly all lay down their lives, eventually, long after they have entered into the second half of life themselves; this Christ compares himself to this little child. And doesn’t even just compare himself,

he says *he is this child*. Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me.

Because the way to real greatness, he tells them, is not through domination or even competition, but through embracing the most vulnerable ones among us. That's who children always represent in the bible. And maybe even the most vulnerable part of ourselves, the child within us. This is how Jesus sees himself, and if we want to follow him into the kingdom of God he has told them, it will be with faith of a child.

Well the kids at that Youth Gathering were not much more than children themselves, but something clicked for them when their value was affirmed. And hopefully after they went back to their congregations it stuck with them and they kept on working, as we all do, to become the greatest version of themselves they can be. And doing all the chest beating and competing that goes along with growing up. And living lives that we hope, will be dedicated to serving and following Jesus, long into the second half of their lives.

My prayer for them, and for all of us, is that we never lose our childlike faith even as we grow older and wiser. And that we never cease to see Jesus in the most innocent and the most vulnerable among us.