

**The Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost**

**Proper 20**

**Holy Comforter Church**

**The Rev. John E. Shields**

**September 20, 2009**

**“I am the greatest!”**

**Do you remember those words coming from the cocky young heavy-weight prize fighter, known at time as Cassias Clay – later to become known as Mohammed Ali?**

**Well, as it turns out – he really was the greatest. And for all the brash, ‘in your face’ young man that he was – he also turned out to be a pretty classy guy in his older age.**

**What Mohammed Ali knew at an earlier age than most was that he needed to differentiate himself from everyone else and that that would ultimately work to his advantage – it did. Even those who detested him for his cockiness, wouldn’t miss watching him if for no other reason than to pull against him – it made him rich, famous and ‘the greatest.’**

**The disciples in today’s gospel from Mark are not engaged in the kind of ‘tongue in cheek’, show business hype of Mohammed Ali – they are serious about who among them is the greatest in the religious sense: Who is the most pious? Who has been next to Jesus the most when he was speaking or working miracles? Who distributed the most bread and fish in the feeding of the five thousand?**

**Like last week's gospel, we find a good bit of this week's text in the other synoptics – Matthew and Luke. All have Jesus' predictions of his death, and all have an account of the disciples arguing among themselves about 'who is the greatest' or who will get the most recognition when Jesus comes into his kingdom.**

**When Jesus asks them about their conversation – the text says, "...they were silent..." You bet they were. They were embarrassed – Jesus is talking about suffering and dying and they are arguing about whom among them is going to be in "Who's Who Among the Early Christians."**

**Perhaps I am being too hard on these fellows. It is easy enough – two thousand years later, with the benefit of knowing the whole story – it is easy enough to be hard on the disciples.**

**I can't help but remember hearing a clergyman some years ago in a classic mixing of metaphors "After all, hind sight is 50/50."**

**Suffice it to say that the disciples are truly human – they refuse to hear what their teacher and friend is telling them about being the Messiah of God – they have their own idea of what that means, and the truth is not going to talk them out of it.**

**In fact, in chapters 8 – 10 of Mark's gospel, Jesus makes three predictions of the passion. My commentary says, "At each of these three points, Mark has the same threefold cluster of material. First, Jesus predicts his suffering, rejection, death, and resurrection. Second, the disciples respond with misunderstanding, confusion, and an inability to accept his message. Third, Jesus gives instruction on discipleship. Our gospel today is the second of these clusters of prediction-response-instruction." (Preaching Through the Christian Year, Craddock, etal, Trinity Press International, 1993, page 418)**

**The problem is the disciples cannot begin to understand a Messiah who would have to suffer and die. They can only see a messiah who is a conquering hero, a political or military or business figure of vast power and influence – a winner in other words – not some sort of mealy mouthed loser who will not fight and scrap and claw his way to the top of the heap.**

**Let's face it folks, we too struggle to accept the notion that being great means to take the last place, to be the servant of all. It is hard for individuals – it is hard for the church.**

**Why do we have such divisions within Christianity? Why do we have such divisions among Episcopalians – some of whom are calling themselves Anglicans and not Episcopalians because the Episcopalians are not getting it right? Or why do those of us who have little or no use for our now Anglican no longer Episcopal brothers and sisters feel superior and disdainful of them?**

**Yes, I am in the latter group. But in my best moments I am not proud of it.**

**Clearly, our divisions as Christians have much to do with how it is we perceive Jesus as Messiah. We constantly recast his life, death and resurrection into creedal statements that exclude those who do not sign on and include the true believers. We are constantly recasting our religion into the same win/lose standards that the world uses.**

**Yet Jesus, when he wishes to teach his disciples about what it means to follow him and to love him, Jesus says 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.”**

**Jesus turns the cultural assumptions about power, success and status upside down.**

**The child is the perfect illustration – powerless and generally defenseless -- relying on others for care. The child is vulnerable – the child is open for help and hope.**

**It is simply true that we, like the disciples, would like the crown of glory without having to bear the cross that precedes it.**

**So it seems to me to be clear if not easy. We are to seek out the powerless and defenseless – the vulnerable – and we are to sacrifice ourselves for them.**

**Our sacrifice is that of giving of ourselves to those who need us. It may be as simple as welcoming them or as complex as assisting them with food and shelter. It may be advocating for them within the powers and principalities of our culture.**

**It probably means looking more closely or with different eyes at some of the issues of our day. It may well mean giving up some political stance that your friends or political affiliates would support.**

**I will just name a few areas – there are many more: War and peace, environmental justice, human sexuality and gender equality, health care, immigration, hunger, housing, racism and education.**

**Generally, when I tell folks that these are the areas where they are challenged to find Christ and to do his work, I get some push back. I**

**have been told that this is the stuff of political discourse and not for church.**

**No politics from the pulpit is the familiar mantra.**

**For instance I once said in a sermon that in a country as wealthy as ours, good health care should be the right of every person and not a privilege for those that can afford it. The response from one person was “You are just quoting the Democratic platform and that shouldn’t be the material of sermons.”**

**Well, frankly at the time, I had no idea that the Democrats or for that matter the Republicans had that in some platform. To me it was and still is, a moral issue, and I believe that God cares about moral issues and that Christians are supposed to take risks in trying to deal with them, even the risk of being rebuffed by fellow Christians.**

**All of us are called to seek and serve the least of these. We are not called to do this because it will make us feel good – perhaps even superior to those who are not doing what we are. We are called to do it because we are called to love God and our neighbor in a giving, sacrificial love. We are able to do that because we know that he first loved us and gave himself for us.**

**The good news is this, I think Henri Nouwen said it best – we are not called to be successful, we are called to be faithful.**

**In other words we do it – we love as best we can and know how, and we don’t have to shout “I am the greatest!”**