

Sermon, Proper 19B, Mark 9:30-37
The Rev. Elizabeth Keeler
September 19, 2021

“But they did not understand what he was saying and they were afraid to ask him.” Today friends, is one of those Sunday’s when I have great sympathy for the disciples. You see, as a child, and even as a young adult, my tendency when I didn’t understand something, was just to stay quiet, not call attention to myself, and lie low. I went to seminary a little later in life, once my third child was in elementary school, and it wasn’t really until then that I started being braver and asking more questions. This instinct to remain silent and clam up when we don’t understand something is pretty common. Many of us when we are unsure are hesitant, even unwilling, to ask for clarification or further explanation. Such is the case this morning with the befuddled disciples. They did not understand what he was saying and they were afraid to ask.

The questions that have been on my heart this week are why, why are the disciples afraid and what, what exactly are they afraid of? Perhaps most importantly, what might we be afraid of when it comes to Jesus?

As we look at today’s Gospel passage closely, we should notice that the disciples are hearing, for the second time, Jesus’s prediction of his Passion. And his sharing that he will be betrayed, killed and then rise again is likely no easier for them on this second telling. Maybe the disciples don’t ask questions because they are afraid that what Jesus is saying might just be true. Perhaps the first time Jesus said it, they could sort of brush it off as something he just said in passing, or something they didn’t quite hear correctly. But now he’s explaining this nightmarish scenario again. I think I’d be afraid to ask questions too. And besides, look what happened to Peter when he tried to question Jesus’s words – he was told “get behind me Satan.”

The truth is, when you start asking questions, you may get answers that are hard to hear, or answers that you are not ready to hear. When you start asking questions, you are engaging in conversation or a dialogue with someone and this can be a rather messy, unpredictable experience. No wonder it’s easier to stay silent, because monologue, or one-sided conversations, are much safer places to be.

And to bring this into our present-day, monologue seems to be all too often the way faith is discussed these days. Rather than an act of open conversation, faith too often has become an act of persuasion whose end goal is complete certainty. Too frequently there seems to be an expectation of complete acceptance around faith with little room for ambiguity, or searching, or questions. Sometimes the way people talk about faith these days is less about the mysteries of faith and more about the mastery of conviction or dogma.

I remember my father, who was a rector at a parish for decades, in many ways like your beloved Jenks, and daddy use to say that he would take a questioning faith over a convicted faith any day. In just the few weeks I’ve been here I’ve run into several folks who shyly admit

that they don't come to church as much because they are just not sure what they believe anymore. Brothers and sisters let me be clear - there's absolutely nothing wrong with not being sure. That's exactly why we come here – to explore, to wonder, to be amazed, and to remember and be assured again and again that God loves us even when we're not sure what we believe.

And I happen to trust with all my whole heart that our wonderings are no surprise to God. I also believe that our engagement, our questions please God just as much, if not more, than our supposed certainty. Because, when you start asking questions, you usually start moving closer towards some kind of deeper understanding.

You may have heard the news that Bishop John Shelby Spong died this week. Jack Spong has the complicated honor of being one of the most controversial contemporary theologians in the Episcopal Church. Now, I'll admit that I'm not a big Bishop Spong fan, he simply goes too far for me on many of his beliefs. But I do find that I have to respect Bishop Spong for his instinct to pose challenging questions. And even if I don't agree with where he comes down on some matters of faith, he certainly has pushed me to think and become clearer on what I do believe.

Friends, this is part of what we care called to do together as a community of faith. May we be brave enough to start conversations and ask questions that matter. May we listen gently, carefully and respectfully to one another when we ask such questions. And may we trust that God will carry all of our questions, doubts, worries and concerns when they are too heavy for us.

Amen.