Sermon for The Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost

Delivered at Christ Church Los Altos on Sunday, September 16, 2018

Text: Mark 8:27-38
Title: Divine things

I grew up playing little league with the guys. I’m pretty sure this was my big brother’s doing, who, five years my senior, figured if he was going to be stuck with two younger sisters, by God, one of them was going to love baseball. I joined my first team when I was seven and played through the summer before seventh grade. I’m sure I would have kept playing, too, except that girls were not allowed to try out for the middle school team, despite my having been first pick in the boys’ league for the last two years. But the sexism of youth sports will have to wait for another sermon … all of that is just to say, I did love baseball, and was very much shaped by those years.

I remember the final game of my third season – the championship game of the playoffs - particularly vividly. I was our starting second basewoman, though I also enjoyed catching and occasionally pitching, and ours was a strong team, but our opponents got off to an early lead 4-0 lead. In my second at bat with two people on base I hit a double that gave us our first two points. It was a few more innings before I came back to the plate in the top of the seventh with bases loaded and hit a triple into the street beyond the field, giving us our first lead. We held on tenaciously through the first half of the ninth, and then things started to go sideways. We headed onto the field, the score still 5-4, a mere three strikes from being the 1992 league champions, when the first kid at bat hit a triple. The pitcher, tired now, got two outs before loaded the bases. The coaches must have been at wits end but they left him in, and five pitches later, he walked the batter, and the game was tied five-five. For those of you who don’t love baseball and whom I’ve already lost, this meant that everything hinged on the next batter. Either he’d get out and we’d go in to extra innings to break the tie, or he’d get on base, and the player on third would score, and we would lose.

My coaches decided it was time to relieve the pitcher, at which point they pulled me from second base to replace him. I was on fire, after all. Responsible for all of our runs. I was having the game of my brief life! I had a few minutes to warm up and then the game recommenced. As I recall, it was the longest at bat in the history of baseball, people. With a full count, I threw a
couple beautiful pitches that were fouled out. And then I threw the last one. It sailed over the diamond and into the catcher’s mit. The referee behind him stood up, everything riding on his call. He took off his mask, shoulders sagging, surely knowing how much all this meant to us, and looked right at me as he held up his hand and said, “It was just this far outside,” and then cried more loudly, “ball!” The other team’s bench erupted in triumphant screams, everyone on their feet, as the batter threw his bat to the side and skipped to first base, his friend sprinting from third to plant his foot on home as dramatically as possible, before disappearing into a gaggle of boys, all screams and delight.

Perhaps, for you, it wasn’t little league. Maybe the stakes were a higher – it was the big game in college, the first time you led a group presentation in grad school, a critical solo, your pet project at work, when you took the lead, you owned it, when everything was going even better than planned and, suddenly, it all fell apart, and what you’d work so hard for, what you’d been dreaming and striving for, living for, even, turned to dust and blew away. I imagine that this is something like how it felt for Peter to be rebuked by Jesus. There he is – doing everything he can to be a good and faithful friend, a stalwart disciple. Trying – trying so hard – to keep up with his mysterious teacher, this elusive miracle man. Peter has left *everything* – his family, his livelihood, his life – to follow Jesus. He is not one of the first disciples called, but once called they become particularly close – so close that in Matthew’s Gospel Jesus tells him he is the rock on which he will build his Church. Surely Jesus saw his friend’s promise, potential, prayer, and power.

And so it happened that one day, while walking to Caesarea Philippi, Jesus rather casually asks his disciples, “who do people say that I am?” Up until this point, no one really knew what to make of Jesus. At first, it is only the spirits that recognize him as someone of particular, peculiar closeness to God. Everyone else is simply amazed and baffled by him (as many still are today). So the disciples start rattling off a few of their best ideas. “John the Baptist” someone calls. “Elijah,” says another. “One of the prophets,” a few others cry, drawing nods and grunts of approval.

And then he asks them more directly, “but who do you say that I am?” Now Mark doesn’t tell us what the other’s say, and I’m willing to bet that’s because a cat suddenly caught everyone’s tongue. You can just see them all grabbing for their water bottles, staring off in the distance as though they didn’t hear him, yanking at their collars. (Awkward!) And Peter, well, he
finds himself on the spot. He and Jesus are BFFs, after all. It would be weird for him not to say anything. And so perhaps it was less courageous than inevitable that he pipes up, eventually, and says what he might not yet know but surely hopes, hopes will all his heart and soul, to be true: “you are the Messiah.” And Jesus, as he did with the demons who recognized him, orders them to keep quiet about it.

Peter must have been elated. Relieved. Exhilarated. His friend, Jesus – Jesus – the Messiah! Holy hommus! But then Jesus keeps talking, and for the first time he reveals to his disciples that he will undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. Now with two thousand years of Christian history behind us, this comes as no surprise. But for Peter and the other disciples this would have been quite a shock. While not everyone was sitting around waiting for him with rapt anticipation, the Messiah had a definite job description in ancient Judaism and suffering, rejection, and death were definitely not part of it. Failure was definitely not part of it. The cross was definitely not part of it. So Peter steers him aside and rebukes him, probably thinking he is doing his friend a favor – I mean, what kind of Messiah talks like this? – which leads to Jesus’ sharp retort, “Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.”

Get behind me, Satan. If you believed in the ancient mythology, then Satan represented the chief power of darkness in the world, the primary agent working against God’s will for creation. Not so much, or only, a person, as a personification of all that is not of God, in and around us. So Jesus saying this to Peter is not only a way of calling him out – Jesus is pointing out, highlighting, a foundational, primary misstep when it comes to walking in God’s ways. And what is it that so offends, disturbs, upsets Jesus about his friend’s words? That Peter is setting his mind not on divine things but on human things. It turns out that the thing that can and will most get in Peter’s way, in our way, as we seek to draw nearer to God, is a lack of imagination.

Peter can see there is something special about Jesus, something so compelling that he is willing to turn from his old life to follow him, but in this moment he cannot conceive of how what Jesus is saying could be true. It doesn’t fit with his mental map, and he can’t stretch far enough to take it in. And that, Jesus is quick to point out, is our biggest problem. We mistake what we can imagine or understand, what we can hold and control, for God – a God who is always and forever full of surprises, free to do as God wills. And we figure if we can’t
understand it then it can’t be real, it must be a threat. But God insists on God’s freedom, and what is more – God wants to share that freedom with us. It is too much. What kind of God does this? (Ours, it turns out.) Our challenge – our biggest challenge – is to let God be God, even, especially, when God’s ways are a mystery to us. Our challenge is to set our minds on divine things instead of human things.

When we go out at night and look up at the stars above, the light from those closest to us, even travelling at 186,000 miles per second, took four years to reach us. But some of the stars are much father away. The light from some of them took 800,000 years to reach out eyes. And scientists today can use special telescopes to see stars whose light has not reach us, some more than 6 trillion light years away. The sheer enormity of our universe is stunning. Staggering. Breathtaking. It is hard to imagine – impossible to truly grasp – and yet most of us don’t have a hard time accepting that the cosmos is this unfathomably enormous. We can’t really make sense of it but we know it is true. Similarly, it is hard to imagine a God capable of creating all that was, is, and is yet to be, who also know us, loves us, and attends to us in our smallest need, our keenest suffering. It is hard to imagine, but that doesn’t make it any less true. Our human minds struggle to grasp divine things, divine ways, but God’s existence and God’s freedom are not limited by our limited imaginations.¹

So here is Jesus, the Messiah, and he is trying to tell his friends, the first people to recognize him, the only ones who really see him, what is about to happen. That, strange, incomprehensible as it might be, the way God is going to turn the world around, usher in salvation, is actually through suffering, death, rejection, and failure. And they resist. Their minds cannot grasp how God can bring about liberation and life through such scandalous, shameful means. They don’t understand. They won’t hear it. It embarrasses them. And Jesus says to his friend, “Wake up, Peter! Open your mind.” Because following Jesus isn’t only about leaving your old life but constantly moving toward a new one. It isn’t only about giving up what was once familiar but continuously stepping outside the realm of the known into the realm of mystery.

So when God decides to work out God’s purposes through your depression, through surrendering everything you once thought mattered most, through this divorce, through your

¹ For more examples of this and reflections on the relationship between our imaginations and our faith, see The Shattered Lantern: Rediscovering a Felt Presence of God by Ronald Rolheiser. This section in particular comes from pages 104-105.
bitterest disappointment, we don’t have to make all the angst and anger and annoyance this might understandably create in us worse by thinking somehow God must have abandoned us, or might not be real in the first place. God’s ways are not our ways, but we are called to live into those ways nonetheless. This is always easier to recognize in hindsight than in the moment. I know I often look back on something I really hoped for, on my best plans for some important thing in my life, on my earnest prayers for a certain outcome, and just a few months, or days or weeks later think, “Thank goodness things didn’t work out as I’d hoped. This is so much better.”

As for that heart-wrenching day for my nine-year-old self, I was crushed. I had felt for a moment like I might win us the game and then, in an instant, that I’d lost it. But that moment taught me a great deal, too. It made me work harder. It made me really want to be the person my future teams could rely on when push came to shove. And, actually, this isn’t a hard, heavy memory at all, because as I watched the player who scored that final run disappear into a cloud of his teammates, I was just as suddenly surrounded by a cloud of my own, and my coaches, and there were tears, but there was also celebration. And it didn’t take me long to realize it was precisely because I already was the player my team trusted to have the ball in the last minutes of a close game that I ended up on that pitching mound in the first place, and things didn’t go as I would have liked that day, but it was a learning opportunity, and not the end of the world.

It is precisely because Jesus does see Peter’s potential, promise, prayer and power that that he expects so much, that he really wants him to understand. And it must have been a crushing moment for Peter to be rebuked by his friend, but it was just one moment in a rich and varied friendship, a learning opportunity, not the end of the world but the unfolding of a new one. Peter would continue to miss the mark from time to time – to resist, to run, to deny his friend - but he would also grow into the person on whom Jesus actually did build his Church. The rebuke was a turning point. A deepening. An awakening. Until Peter, in his humanness, would become the foundation for a heavenly thing: Christ’s own body on this earth, here and now.

What kind of God does this? Ours, it turns out. Amen.