Sermon
September 23, 2018 - Proper 20B
The Rev. Gary R Brower, PhD

There are times, as a preacher, when you wonder why the folks who put together the lectionary readings make the choices they did. Sometimes a long passage will have a church of verses omitted . . . Why? Sometimes the combination of the three scripture readings and psalm seem to have nothing in common. I think every preacher has asked, “How am I supposed to deal with that reading?”. (And most of us just focus on one of the other texts—an advantage of our lectionary.) Other times, we’re given a selection—like with today’s Gospel—where there are two distinct stories, stories linked in the author’s mind, but with a connection that seems a bit opaque.

That connection between these two stories has eluded me for years. As I said, each stands on its own: Jesus teaches his disciples for a second time, that he is about to be arrested, put to death and rise again . . . and they don’t get it. And, then, we find the disciplines arguing about greatness, with Jesus’ redefinition of that quality. But, as I mulled the lessons over and over this week, I finally saw, at least, a connection — we’ll never really know what Mark intended. I think the two stories in the Gospel have to do with ‘line of succession’. There are three predictions of the Passion in Mark: one we heard last week, one today, and the third in a few weeks. Today’s and the next have very similar stories following them . . . having to do with “greatness” down the line. I think the connection is “Who’s next in line?”

The question of succession is a real question; it faces us all the time. We are in an election season — who will succeed our current legislators? We’ve had a retirement in the Supreme Court — who will be the next Justice? Y’all at Good Shepherd have gone through the process of succession . . . and here I am! In all of these cases, there has been a fairly established procedure for dealing with a vacancy. But, in cases like this morning’s, there’s little precedent. The question is how a movement is sustained once the charismatic founder leaves the scene.

In some cases, the leader appoints a successor. Moses chose Joshua. Upon Elisha was Elisha’s mantle cast. In other cases, however, the death of the leader left a huge hole, and a dispute arose over to fill it. When the prophet Mohammed died, was the successor to be a blood relative or the most capable? The resulting dispute lives on today in the Sunni - Shi’ite split. The same question hit the Mormons upon Joseph Smith’s death — blood lineage or able leader. With Jesus announcing his impending death, leaving no physical progeny, nor having appointed an heir apparent, his disciples — pretty naturally — gravitated to the logical answer: “Who’s the most capable, the most likely . . . the greatest? Very logical, natural, question.

But, as our readings from the Wisdom of Solomon and Psalm 1, as well as our Collect, suggest, the “logical” or “natural” response may be in direct contradiction to a godly consideration. And Jesus’ response to his disciples really hammers that point home, and I would suggest, in two ways. First, it appears that he dismisses the question of success, or at least the concern over a vacuum of leadership. This is more pointed later in the Mark at the third prediction of the Passion (Mk 10.32-40). But, who, given the cast of characters in this
account, would see a child as a logical successor to the one Peter had just declared to be the Messiah?

But, second, and much more evident, Jesus does his “subversive teacher” thing (hearkening back to one of Marcus Borg’s four characteristics of Jesus). He redefines “greatness”. Just as he did last week, by redefining “gaining one’s life” as “losing it”, here he defines “greatness” as extreme servanthood, and the embracing of the least of the least. Think about it: what comes to mind when you think of “servant”? [Pause] Now, what do you think of when you imagine the lowest of the low — in both our society, but also in Jesus’ time. [Pause]

Here, in this story, Jesus continues his “physical teaching by hugging a child. You’ll recall that elsewhere in the Gospels, including Mark, the disciples try to keep children away from Jesus — not important enough for such an exalted teacher. But, here, Jesus brings in a child and embraces it. And he drives home the point to his disciples: “Welcome the child and you welcome me”. Implied is the contrary, “Exclude the weak/helpless and you exclude me”. “Greatness” is redefined . . . as is the question of succession: “You don’t need a leader to do my work! This is a movement, not an organization!”

By taking a child into his arms, Jesus models a very different kind of leadership; he models a different kind of community. We are so accustomed to top-down structures. It is as difficult for us as it was for Jesus’ followers to see any social structure any other way. We even tend to project out ideas of hierarchy onto non-human groupings. And, when we do, we’re often surprise when that projection doesn’t quite work. For example, have you ever seen a large flock — almost a cloud — of blackbirds or starlings move as one, shifting as a whole. The movement seems random, almost joyful, with no apparent leader.

I ran across another example earlier this week in an article* about the “social structure” of herds of horses, a 40-million-year-old social system that still succeeds and thrives. I imagine most of us were taught that herds were “governed by a roguish stallion” — the “alpha male” with his brood. But what really happens is that, in the words of Kelly Wendorf (the author), “Herds operate in what is referred to as a ‘moveable hierarchy’, that is, that the leadership shifts and moves depending upon the needs of the herd. Often it is a mare, or a team of mares who govern the herd . . . . The mares determine the ‘right place’ for each member of the herd based on each individual’s temperaments, gifts and weaknesses . . . . Contrary to folk tale, the herd is not there to serve and bow to the dominant’s whim simply because he is ‘boss’. Instead leadership’s goal is to serve the good of the whole. It’s premise — care, love, safety. The immense power of the herd is accessed not through . . . toughness, might and ferocity, but instead through its sensitivity — empathy, listening and quiet presence.”

Another, more human, example of “greatness-as-power” being turned on its head was seen in a fly-fishing legend, “Lefty” Kreh. (I am a fly-angler, by the way.) Lefty died last spring, having just turned 93. In our angling world, Lefty was one of the greats. Articles, and tributes filled magazines and internet blogs and discussion groups. Yes, he was a master angler, but his concerns were less about the number or size of the fish he caught, and tore about the future of the sports . . . the human future. In one of his last interviews**, he commented on his role as a teacher. He said, “I enjoy sharing things. I’ve always been willing to share and teach. I’ve found that there are two ways to write or to teach. You either display your knowledge or you
share your knowledge. I was never desirous of a claim or anything. My car mechanic is smarter than me. He can start my car when I can’t. I think sharing is important . . . It’s the sharing of knowledge rather than trying to display it.” In another interview***, newsman Tom Brokaw said of Lefty, “I learned from [him] that the key to sharing genius is a bottom-up not a top-down approach. He lived to share what he learned, and he did it in the most accommodating fashion. He taught everybody from the bottom up.”

In the company of horse herds and fly anglers, Jesus teaches us something profound about leadership, about greatness, about succession. The herds survive by concern for the individuals - all of them - in the herd. Lefty knew that sharing was more important than displaying. Jesus teaches his disciples that caring for a child is more significant for the future of his movement than a paltry concern for “greatness”. In all cases, true greatness is located in prioritizing relationships, not exercising power or authority.

Our “greatness” at Good Shepherd, therefore, needs to be based on what we already do well — making and sustaining relationships. This was demonstrated last week, when, in our discussion about “Invite Welcome Connect”, we broke into pairs to share stories. The reports back were instructive. Less important was the content of the stories than was the building of deeper relationships . . . and the expressed desire to do that more often.

To be known as a community where relationships are made and sustained — in common work, like the Men’s Group cleaning the grill, or volunteers setting up for the Pumpkin Patch. Or in pastoral visits, whether by me or the Lay Eucharistic Visitors. Or in meals together as with the Hungry Flock or the Youth Brunch next Sunday. To be known as a community where relationships with all are made and sustained — that reputation will mark as as true and worthy successors of our Great Shepherd.

Amen.


** Shannon Farlow, “An Interview with Lefty”, American Angler (July / August 2018, 25-29).

*** Farlow, “Friends Remember Lefty”, American Angler (July / August 2018, 30-31).