

# Preaching from St. Stephen's Pulpit

St. Stephen Lutheran Church, Williamsburg, VA

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## Asking Fearful Questions

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Beloved by God, my siblings in Christ; grace to you and peace from God our Creator and our Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Fear sure gets in the way of relationships, doesn't it? That point is certainly well made in Mark's Gospel anyway! Just last Sunday we heard in Mark 8 how Peter's fear got in the way of his identifying Jesus. He was correct in calling him the Messiah, but when he started to speak of death and resurrection, Peter's fear took over.

Then if we take a quick look at the verses we skipped over between last Sunday's Gospel and today's we'll find the Transfiguration event. One of the markers of that event is Peter blathering on about three shelters because, as the text goes out of its way to tell us, "He did not know what to say, they were so frightened."<sup>1</sup>

Two specific examples of the disciples not understanding Jesus and not engaging to learn more because they were afraid. Which brings us to today's Gospel text. Jesus again speaks of his death and resurrection, and the text tells us that the disciples "did not understand what he meant and were afraid to ask him about it."<sup>2</sup> Then, a short while later when Jesus asks them about their conversation, the text tells us that "they kept quiet because on the way they had argued about who was the greatest."<sup>3</sup> What kept them quiet here? Shame? Perhaps yes. But I think fear was at play too. After all, shame is rooted in fear...just a more social sort of fear.

Again and again and again the author of Mark provides us with examples of fear interfering with the disciples' ability to engage with Jesus. It keeps them from understanding his identity. It makes it hard for them to understand even the simplest of teachings (I mean, come on, "anyone who wants to be first must be the very last, and the servant of all" doesn't seem that incomprehensible). Fear routinely gets between disciples and Jesus...between humanity and God.

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<sup>1</sup> Mark 9:6 (NRSVUE)

<sup>2</sup> Mark 9:32

<sup>3</sup> Mark 9:34

It should come as no wonder that Jesus responds to all this fear by placing a child in their midst. Now, much has been made of the social status of children in the time and place of Christ. And yes, Jesus is certainly being radically welcoming in bringing a child into their midst. But I think it's more than that. Jesus isn't just speaking about being welcoming to children here. I think he is specifically lifting children up as the sort of fearless questioners we are invited to be with God.

The fearless curiosity of children comes from a place of unconscious humility that is a powerful tool for mirror-work and compassion. You all know what I mean about the fearless curiosity of children, right? It usually starts off with "Why?" and takes off from there. Both of my children went through the "why?" stage around age three or so. Why is the sky blue? Why is grass green? Why does dirt taste yucky? Sound familiar? It's an important stage of development. We know we know nothing and so we boldly (and often repeatedly) ask.

I think Jesus is inviting us to that sort of relationship with God here. The sort of relationship where we can ask any question. Even ones we're afraid might be "dumb" or might reveal our ignorance. The examples we've seen seem to indicate that Jesus...God...would prefer our "dumb" questions over our persisting in unhealthy assumptions.

Remember, Peter wasn't rebuked for asking questions. He was rebuked for acting out of his false assumptions regarding Jesus' identity. Perhaps the disciples missed this distinction in the aftermath and kept their mouths shut to avoid getting called Satan the way Peter was. But it's unfortunate if that's what's going on here, since Jesus makes it abundantly clear elsewhere in Mark that he is perfectly willing to answer questions and explain things to his followers.

Fear gets in the way of communication and understanding. It often leads us to doubling down on our assumptions and stubbornly holding on to inaccurate perspectives. And it often comes out of pride. The disciples won't ask questions because they are afraid...afraid of what? Being called Satan? Perhaps. More likely though, they're afraid of being thought ignorant...and so they persist in their ignorance.

So, Jesus places a child in their midst. Someone full of ignorance...but also someone full of curiosity. Someone without power or status, certainly, but also without pretense or pride. Someone who knows fear, of course, but when they're around people they trust, in a loving community, the fearless questions burst forth!

The greatest are those who know humility, who know their own ignorance, who know their own limitations. God invites humble, ignorant, limited us into the sort of relationship where we can come to God with our questions. God invites us into the safe and trusting space of relationship with even our doubts and worries. God wants all of us to be in relationship with God but fear so often means we keep some part of ourselves back. It so often keeps us from saying what we need to say and being who God created us to be.

What would it look like to cultivate a community where no one fears asking questions? The sort of safe and trusting community where people can wrestle with questions of identity. What might it mean to start from a position of humble curiosity when it comes to welcoming others? How can we lead with authenticity and vulnerability as we engage with the world?

Welcoming God means welcoming people as they are. Welcoming God means creating the space necessary for tough questions. Welcoming God means setting aside the arrogance of our certainty and entertaining the “Why” more often. Welcoming God means not letting fear get in the way.

Are we following the example of Nicodemus in John 3? Letting our fear lead us to coming to Jesus at night so as not to be seen by others. Being so clouded by the world that we cannot comprehend Jesus invitation to new life. Or are we following the example of the Samaritan Woman in John 4? Boldly asking questions of Jesus, unafraid of revealing ignorance.

Jesus welcomed both with their questions. Fear got in the way for Nicodemus. It might not have for the Samaritan Woman. Fear frequently got in Peter’s way, and the other disciples’ too for that matter. But their questions were still welcomed, their fear and the actions taken grounded in that fear were not.

It strikes me that the original ending of Mark’s Gospel ends with this same question. Mark 16:8 ends the Gospel with this line: “Trembling and bewildered, the women went out and fled from the tomb. They said nothing to anyone, because they were afraid.” Fear gets in the way again. Yet it didn’t last for long, did it? They must have overcome that fear, since here we are. The message was shared, perhaps with trembling knees...but the fear was overcome, the news shared, and a new community birthed.

I invite you to reflect on the role of fear in your own life. How often does fear prevent you from asking questions, seeking understanding, or engaging fully with others? Consider what it might look like to cultivate a community where fear is set aside, and

curiosity is encouraged. By embracing humility and curiosity, we can build a trusting environment where people feel safe to express their doubts and seek understanding. Let us strive to welcome others as they are, create space for tough questions, and prioritize the pursuit of truth over the comfort of certainty. In doing so, we can overcome the barriers that fear creates and move towards a more profound and meaningful connection with the divine and each other. In doing so, we participate in the in-breaking of God's Kingdom. Amen.