

Mark 9:30.37

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An update from the realms of singularity: This has been an odd week for me and three of my friends in our mutual search for love. To begin with, a good male friend had a date, which is not rare in and of itself, but this girl seemed ultra-promising. The prospective girlfriend is accomplished professionally, works with prisoners, and is quite beautiful. She also plays well with others. Then, on the date, the woman only talked about her bitterness, scorn and resentment from a previous marriage. She also mentioned that she did not care to date. We shall see what happens with that one. Then, along similar lines, your Rector also had a bit of an unromantic run-in. After a date with a particular gentleman, I politely let the man know that I did not think that we were a good match. After all, he traveled for work and spent 6 months of the year in the Midwest. The man responded by saying, "That's alright. You're not my type anyway. And besides, you look too gay, except for those pictures I saw of you on your parish website. There," he said, "you looked a little more normal" I was tempted to remind this not so genteel gentlemen that in the pictures wherein I had supposedly met this thresh-hold of masculinity, I was in vestments. Tell me, how does wearing silk and satin seem more masculine than jeans? But I did not say anything. I only wrote about it for you good folks.

But then, two of my other single friends had completely different experiences. If me and my first friend were Good Friday, my other friends are a possible Easter. Two of my friends, both in their thirties, who have never actually even had a long term, romantic relationship, called me in tears this week, tears of happiness and some confusion. It seems, that in the very same week, one day apart, my two friends who have not known love in years have fallen wildly and passionately in love with other men. Being so new to the experience, so scared by what it might mean for their lives, and fearful of being hurt or things falling apart, these women have called me in the middle of the night, puddled in salty water. Each is now attempting to march toward a real, passionate, fun, centered, grounded, mutual, caring, Godly love. And so are the men they have fallen for. And yet, they are terrified. I keep telling them that the reason that they call it "falling in love" is because it feels like a free fall, until you go splat. But then I tell them to hold on, "You might be surprised."

I do hope and pray that they and anyone else who seeks it are surprised by love. But my point is that to be in that situation, where love finds you, is to be in a threshold moment. In that moment, there is the choice to respond to that love or to run away in fear and toward safety. To move forward in love involves opening ourselves up to an unknown future. It means being vulnerable and possibly getting hurt. On the other hand, to run away means a certain, safe course, at the cost of loneliness. Whether it is friendship, romance, family, or the grocery store check out clerk, the choice is there, and that choice and that threshold to love others are what I want to talk about this morning.

In the Gospel reading today, we hear of the disciples at just such a threshold moment. And they, unlike my friends, seem to run away. The event takes place in Capernaum. Capernaum is a small town on the shore of the Sea of Galilee. You can actually go to this town in modern times, and

see the town olive presses and a synagogue which still partially stands. You can also see the supposed home of Peter, the disciple. And you can look off into the hills and a valley, which would have been the only passable way to Jerusalem from the area of Galilee.

As the disciples walk toward this small sea town, they are full of romance, but not much real, grounded love. They have been swept off their feet by this messiah. And they are giddy. But they are unaware of their threshold moment. They do not even realize that though they are happy, they are running scared. Instead of focusing on Capernaum and what Jesus was really saying, they look toward the mountain pass to Jerusalem. They imagine going through that pass and toward Jerusalem. They image Jesus as a king, and themselves as at Jesus' right hand. They, understandably imagine a world in which everything is easy, and they are powerful. The disciples only have to argue about their positions, who will be the greatest. In short, they are like a Hollywood Romantic Comedy which ends with the wedding and neglects the difficult work of a marriage.

In the age of cell phones, the disciples should have been calling their best friends in a panic, asking for help, puddled in salty water. But instead, they do not even know the risks they are taking. Jesus, luckily, confronts them, and they confess their conversation to Jesus. They tell of their self-promotion, and their anxiety. They say that they have turned Jesus' command to love into rivalry and fear.

Jesus sits them down in a circle in a house in Capernaum, perhaps even the house of Peter, and demonstrates a different way for them. He tells them that they are retreating to safety when they need to open themselves up to the vulnerability of loving. Jesus says, "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all." And then Jesus takes a nameless child and puts that child in the center of their circle. He takes this powerless youth, someone who cannot confer power, and who only needs love and help and food and cannot give any. And Jesus says, "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me, but the one who sent me."

And in a sense, we are being given the tools to meet the threshold moments of our lives. Jesus is giving the disciples the antidote to their need to be great. Jesus is showing the disciples an antidote to their fear and their pain. Jesus shows them another way. To be scared means to argue about who is the greatest. It means to fight for everything. It is to engage in rivalry and spite with whatever we face. It is to think that somehow we should be treated better than others. And to engage in love means making sure that the people who have no power, who are marginalized, are welcomed into the center of our communities. It is to commit ourselves to that difficult work, and it is to be open to the hard work of relationships with others.

And it is to admit when we have gone astray. The funny thing about this passage, is that there are a wealth of sermon opportunities, sermon possibilities often taken. There is the faith of a child, innocent and blameless. There is service for others as a cornerstone of our hope and our faith. There is the concept of who our messiah will be as a messiah of love and not judgement. And yet, almost none of that would be possible in this story; we would never had had those lessons, if Jesus had not seen that they they were arguing about who is the greatest and that they had fallen into

rivalry.

Quite frankly, our failures and our willingness to lay them before God, are the biggest strengths that we have. That is what made redemption possible. The regular process of doing that is what enables us, in the threshold moments of our lives, to step up and love, and to not run away. It also enables us to change course when we do run away. So set aside the shame and the pain. Let yourself be free, and realize that this is part of our path to God. The road to hell might be paved with good intentions, but the road to heaven is paved with an acceptance of our failures, and a willingness and courage to keep searching and to keep going. It was a hard lesson for the disciples. It is a difficult one for us as well.

The beauty of our God is that our God turns the ugly into the beautiful, weak into the strong, the sinful into the blameless, the unlovable into the cherished and adored, and the hungry into the well-fed. But we only recognize that we are beautiful, strong, cherished, blameless, and fat with love, when we acknowledge and care for the parts of ourselves and others that are ugly, unlovable, starving, and scary. And that is why we are here, to care for those parts of ourselves and others, to see that God is redeeming what we offer to God, even our bad dates. And ultimately, that process, and being present to that process, is what allows us to keep our faith and to keep loving, ourselves, others, and God.