

The Rev. Bradley C. Dyche
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Mark 9:30-37
Proper 20

Growing up in the 1980's, I loved *Growing Pains*, not the actual gradual, grotesque, emotional growing pains of life. Those were horrendous. But I adored *Growing Pains*, the hit television show that was pure schlocky, bubble gum shmoltz with anything but the actual difficulties of maturing. The show starred Alan Thicke and Joanna Kerns, and the teen stars of Tracey Gold and Kirk Cameron. They were all members of a family called the Seavers, and it was one of those programs with advertisements like, "This week, on *Growing Pains*, The Seaver family confronts the difficult issue of cheating on tests when young Mike is tempted by friends," and the show would go on to make *Brady Bunch* types of solutions that would never work in the real world.

All the boys in my elementary school wanted to be like Kirk Cameron. I wanted to be like Kirk Cameron. He was the Fonzie and Eddie Haskell of the 80's: cool, calm, collected, sarcastic, dim-witted, and easy to like. He exuded these things, and to impressionable children like me, he was a god. Some of my fellow Glenwood Elementary School Students in Enid Oklahoma got leather coats just like Kirk's character. Some even wore clothes like his; I refused to go to that tasteless extreme. They played into the hands of sly advertisers who put the clothes on Kirk's back the same moment as our department store racks.

What I wanted was to be like Kirk's character, not his clothes, but who he was. And by saying, who he was, I am, embarrassingly, not talking about his personality or his charm, but really this: his hair. Kirk Cameron had naturally wavy, curly, perfectly gelled, sheened hair. Everyone on the show remarked about how great his do was. The girls, the Mother. It seemed that his hair was a solution to the problems of the world, and I wanted locks like his. Coif me, shape me, mold me. I wanted his hair. But my strands were straight and not wavy. The situation would call for drastic measures. I needed a perm.

My parents were not so easily sold. After weeks of careful convincing, they finally relented, giving me a budget of 45 dollars. They told me that if I could not get my hair done for that, no dice and no perm. I finally found a reasonable place, Fantastic Sams. Luckily, though it was modestly priced, Fantastic Sams was not the sort of juvenile joint wherein children sit on plastic airplanes and horses. When I arrived, I took my seat in the adult chair. And Jenny, my stylist came over for the "consultation". Beginning to comb through my hair, she asked, "What are we doing for you today?" The words smacked off her lips like the stale piece of bubble gum in her mouth. I opened up my coat and carefully, cautiously unfurled a folded picture from one of my sister's magazines "Teen-Bop." It was a picture of Kirk Cameron, a close up, with great hair. "This is what I want," I said. "But you have straight hair, honey," she replied. "You see my problem," I matter of factly said. And thus began the process of the perm. It was an arduous period of hours. I sat with my hair in pins and curlers. I was flanked by middle aged women in the line of hair dryers. The toxic fumes are probably still lurking in my body. But, after hours of primping, my new Kirk Cameron coiffure was revealed. And I have to say that Fantastic Sams

was anything but Fantastic. My perm looked ridiculous. I looked ridiculous. Jenny was a pernicious perm purveyor. I looked nothing like Kirk Cameron, and the whole ordeal only made more problems than it solved. Luckily, over the next few months, as my hair relaxed, I realized that I was not the only boy who pondered perming. There were many suspiciously curly male hairstyles at Glenwood Elementary that year.

And here is the poignancy of the perm. For today, I want to explore the question of how we come to want something. How do we desire what we desire? How did I really come to seek such a ridiculous hairdo? Because whether we are elementary school kids idolizing a teen star or adults attempting to keep up with the Jones, we as humans tend to want, desire, and hope through imitation. We desire by watching what other people want and desire. It is difficult to say that we want anything just because we want it ourselves. Often, it is society, celebrities, athletes, our best friends who inform us what we eventually feel we need. Let's be honest. We are all pawns of mimicry. It might affect some of us Kirk Cameron want-to-be types more than others, but it is an issue for all.

Jesus knew this reality about humanity. In today's Gospel, we see Jesus journeying through Galilee, and on the way, there are attempts to make sure that no one is alerted to their presence. Almost under the covert cover of night, Jesus passes through the countryside. After all, everyone has misunderstood who Jesus is. Week after week, in our readings we have seen this miscommunicated, no real dialogue dynamic play out. Even the disciples do not seem to understand. Jesus, like those of us who have preached over similar passages week after week, must have been frustrated and sought refuge. And so, Jesus focuses on the disciples. Instead of trying to save the whole country, he hones in on his close-knit companions. He must have hoped that before he died, at least a few would understand who God really is. But that plan does not work either. While Jesus prattles away about what being the Messiah really means. While Jesus shares that God is concerned about the humble, and the lowly, the sacrificed, and the scape-goated, and while Jesus says that he will even put himself in the position of the victim on a cross to make that point and show us that God does not desire those things, the disciples are meanwhile discussing which of them will be the greatest, the most powerful, the wealthiest disciple of Christ the golden King.

And here is where we go back to the unfortunate perming of my youth. Even for the disciples, even for the earliest followers of Jesus, there is a proclivity to imitate, model, and fashion themselves after the celebrities and royalty of their day. They are so focused on fashioning themselves in the image of royal power that they fail to live into the image of God in which they were created. With delusions of grandeur, they cannot imagine the lovelier, loftier mission of Jesus.

Jesus like any good teacher does not give up. He gives the disciples the same information through a completely different medium. He gathers the disciples around a child, in a circle, and he holds the child up. And this is important: think back to elementary school, when a group of children circles one individual, what is most likely to happen? They will isolate and ridicule that child, become a prototypical lynch mob. And here, Jesus and the disciples stand like a lynch mob around a victim, corralling this child, who has no escape. They could have imitated rage.

But instead of exerting his power by killing or harming this lamb, this peasant child. Instead of circling and sacrificing the child as Pontius Pilate and countless others will do to him, Jesus says, "Be like this child, this potential vulnerable victim, this lamb in your love for God." He says, "If you love and welcome this child, you have loved and welcomed me." Jesus, as a good teacher and rabbi, walks the disciples up to the cliff of scape-goating and the mimicking of rage and then offers them another choice.

Jesus understands that our desire is mediated through others, that we are magnificent mimickers. And accepting that about us, nurturing that about us, Jesus turns our world on its head. He says, that if we seek something, someone, some being to imitate, we should imitate God. And I would say that part of the reason that Jesus even comes to be with us is so that we can have a direct object for such an imitation. In other words, if imitation is the sincerest form of flattery, we are invited to sincerely flatter our God. We should greet the world as Christ meets us, knowing our problems, understanding our failures, and still welcoming us to God's arms. While many are concerned about imitating celebrities, while others are forming lynch mobs, we get to welcome children.

And that is what we do each Sunday and why we do it. When we come to the Eucharist, we invite ourselves to enter into another story, a story of self-giving, a narrative about serving one another so that when we leave here, we have a touchstone for our actions and beliefs. True, such imitation does not have the lure of People Magazine in a checkout line, and to some extent, it goes against our normal way of thinking that we can be all original. But such a way of ordering ourselves is honest about our nature, is rooted in us caring for one another, and is connected to the source of our Creation, God. And I would argue that serving one another beats a bad perm any day of the week.