**“Crickets”**

Mark 9:30-37

Crickets—there are two different times in our scripture reading when that’s all we hear—crickets. Do you know that expression? Sometimes in cartoons, a character makes a bad joke and waits for the laughter. But the soundtrack is so silent all you can hear are crickets. Or somebody asks for a volunteer for a difficult assignment and waits for someone to step forward and speak up. But no one steps forward, and the only sound is crickets. Two different times in today’s reading crickets are all we hear—crickets.

In our scripture reading, there’s been a dramatic turn in Mark’s telling of the Gospel story. And this turn begins in last Sunday’s scripture reading when Jesus flat out asks his disciples, “Have y’all figured it out yet? Do you know who I am?” And on that occasion, Peter boldly steps forward and proclaims, “You’re the Messiah!” But Jesus immediately says, “Shush! Not so loud! Don’t tell this to anybody!”

Now Jesus doesn’t deny it. And, as I’ve pointed out before in previous sermons, Mark’s Gospel begins with this proclamation. The whole purpose of Mark’s book is to tell the Good News of Jesus, that is, that he is the Messiah. So, halfway through Mark’s story, Peter has figured it out. But Jesus says, “Shush! Don’t tell anybody! [Not yet.]”

And in last week’s story, Jesus also claims a different title for himself—Son of Man. Some of us are old enough to remember how the two-sport athlete Bo Jackson used to refer to himself in the third person. That’s sort of what Jesus is doing here. But he calls himself “Son of Man.” Jesus says, “The Son of Man must undergo great suffering.” Suffering, say what? “The Son of Man must be rejected and killed and after three days rise again.” Rejected and killed, that doesn’t sound right. And so, on that occasion, Peter takes Jesus aside and says, “Whoa! Slow down there, Tiger, I mean Son of Man. Jesus, I think you’re a little confused here. Messiahs don’t suffer. Messiahs don’t get killed. Messiahs come to conquer.” But turning to the rest of his disciples, Jesus says to Peter, “Get thee behind me, Satan!”

So, in today’s story, when Jesus says for the second time, “The Son of Man is to be betrayed…and kill[ed, and] will rise again,” this time what do we hear? Crickets! They weren’t about to make the same mistake Peter made the last time Jesus made this proclamation. This time they kept their objections to themselves. Crickets!

As today’s scripture reading begins, Jesus and his disciples are traveling, traveling toward Jerusalem and toward the cross. And all along the way, Jesus is trying to get them ready, ready for the cross. That’s the dramatic turn in Mark’s story I mentioned, and that’s the reason for the delay in announcing Jesus’ identity. In Mark’s Gospel—after Peter figures it out and proclaims, “You are the Messiah!”—Jesus focuses most of his time on trying to re-orient the disciples’ understanding of what it means to be a Messiah.

In the second part of our reading, Jesus and his disciples reach the city of Capernaum. This is sort of home base. This is the city where they live. And so, as they enter the house, Jesus asks, “By the way, I heard you guys arguing about something on the way here. What was that all about?” Crickets!

Let me explain. In one of the stories, in between last Sunday’s scripture reading and today’s reading, Jesus takes Peter, James, and John to the top of a mountain, just these three disciples. And there Jesus is met by the spirits of Elijah and Moses, and Jesus’ body is transfigured to a dazzling color of white. And they even hear the voice of God Almighty. And you’ve got to wonder if these three disciples began to think they must be sort of special to be chosen for this special event. Perhaps they were sort of on a higher spiritual plane than the other nine disciples—sort of a superclass of disciples, over and above the ordinary everyday class of disciples.

All along the way, Jesus had been trying to teach them about the nature of Christian discipleship, which of course should be a reflection of Jesus’ Messiahship. And, as I said in last week’s sermon, Jesus is saying that his Messiahship includes suffering love on a cross, which ultimately leads to resurrection. Here’s the point. While Jesus was trying to teach them the humility of his suffering love, the disciples were arguing over who was the greatest disciple.

The story says that Jesus called the twelve disciples together, and Jesus sat down. In the culture of his day, that’s what a teacher would do. A teacher would sit to teach. And Jesus said, “All right, let’s get this straight. Whoever wants to be the most important must strive to be the least important. In fact, the one who serves the meals, and sweeps the floors, and cleans the toilets—that’s the most important person in the church.”

And then the story says Jesus took a little child in his arms and said, “Here’s an example of what I’m talking about. Whoever welcomes a little bitty baby, like this one right here, well, when you welcome a baby, you’re welcoming me.” Jesus continues, “Remember how it works in this world. When you welcome me, God’s agent in the world, you’re welcoming the one who sent me.” Did you get that? When we welcome a baby into the church, we are welcoming Jesus, and when we welcome Jesus, we’re welcoming God Almighty. Therefore, when we welcome a baby, we are welcoming God.

Now, in today’s world, we assume Jesus means that sweet, innocent, adorable babies deserve, that is they have a right, to be welcomed just the same as adults. But that’s not the way babies were seen in Jesus’ day. Back then, babies had very few rights, and they were not seen as deserving anything. After all, what are babies good for? They can’t do any work on the farm. They’re not capable of herding sheep. They can’t even clean up after themselves, much less help with any of the household chores. Babies were just another mouth to feed. An investment in future labor perhaps, but for now they had no value or status whatsoever. At least that’s the way it was seen in Jesus’ day.

But Jesus says when we welcome an unproductive, lowly baby and give them the status, the rights, and the honor of a productive adult, well, it is just as if we were welcoming Jesus. And when we welcome Jesus, we welcome God Almighty.

Many of you may know that some members of our church are investigating the program to help Afghan refugees settle into our Greensboro community. Working through our Mission Committee, we are considering taking on this ministry as a part of our church’s outreach. Now, I don’t know how all of us may feel about this ministry, but, knowing that there are strongly different opinions in our secular culture about allowing *any* refugees into our country, perhaps there may be different opinions within our church.

So, let me begin by saying I recognize that this issue is not perfectly aligned with the points I have made so far in this sermon. The argument could be made that these Afghans *do* deserve to be brought into our country and into our community. After all, many of these refugees are refugees because they supported our armed forces. But on the other hand, many of these refugees are probably not highly educated. How easily will they assimilate into our culture and become productive contributors to our economy? I don’t know. And perhaps I’m wrong in my assumption about their education. Nevertheless, these are the questions that some may ask.

So, why would we welcome these “unskilled refugees” into our community? Well, because, by welcoming them, we welcome Jesus. And when we welcome Jesus, we welcome God Almighty.

Now, let’s look at this issue from both sides, and let me begin by saying that I am not presenting this as a theological point found in our scripture reading. What I am about to say is my own practical belief. So, let me take my preacher hat off, and put on my citizen hat. I personally believe our country needs secure borders. I confess I am not smart enough or well-informed enough to understand all the issues of immigration, but, from a practical standpoint, I don’t think our country can afford to allow everyone into our country. In my opinion, we could not afford the economic cost without wrecking our economy, because if we wreck our economy the poor will suffer the most. And I also believe we cannot afford it for security reasons.

But now, let me put my preacher hat back on and look at the other side. As I pointed out in a recent sermon, a part of Old Testament Law and ethics was the command to welcome the stranger, to protect the weak, and to uphold security for alien immigrants. After all, scripture reminded the ancient Hebrews, “You were once immigrants who fled Egypt, so you ought to be able to sympathize with their plight.”

So, with all that said, I hope this is a mission and ministry we can all get behind, welcoming these Afghan refugees into our nation and into our community and helping them to become productive members of our city.

And let me also say this is why this church supports ministries like Greensboro Urban Ministries, the Backpack Program, A Simple Gesture, Guilford Guys, and many other outreach ministries. As Christians, we are called—we are commanded—to welcome and help those who find themselves at a place in life where they can’t help themselves. We are called to welcome those who our secular society says are undeserving. And we are called to treat them with dignity and respect, and even to treat them as equals. And, if you stop and think about it, we are equals, because none of us has earned God’s love. All of us—all of us—have been welcomed into a relationship with God Almighty only by the grace of Jesus.

So, the next time you’re asked to welcome the stranger who visits our church for worship, or to bring food donations for the hungry, or, once our Covid restrictions begin to lift, to physically go out and feed the hungry and support those in need, the next time this church asks for volunteers for outreach ministry, don’t turn Jesus away. When we ask, “Who will help,” I want to hear you say, “I'll do it. Send me!” And I want to hear you say it so loudly, I won’t hear any crickets!

Let us pray:

Keep us humble, Lord. Keep us ever humble. For while we were still sinners, Christ died for us; Christ died for me. So, help us to welcome *all* sinners, sinners just like me. Amen.

David A. Cagle

September 26, 2021