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## *Embracing Fear and Confusion*

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The Reverend Beth Knowlton  
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Mark 9:30-37  
The Cathedral of St. Philip  
8:45, 11:15, & 4:00 p.m.

I remember vividly the first time I entered the student lounge at the University of Michigan's Institute for Public Policy studies. I was a new student and didn't know a soul. I had left the comfort of my small liberal arts college where I felt confident. I had traded it for a larger campus, a strange apartment, and a stomach full of knots. I entered the lounge with the hope most of us have in such a situation. I wanted to be welcomed. I wanted someone else to make the first overture and put me at ease.

Instead I entered into what felt like an Olympic style competition. The anxiety was crackling in the air as people introduced themselves to one another. Somehow it was common for someone's GRE score to be casually tossed into conversation whether the subject had been grocery shopping or the location of one's next class. I was regaled with stories of how many other schools the students had applied to, where they were still waitlisted, and whether the Kennedy School at Harvard really measured up to the applied economics we would soon experience at IPPS.

I felt anything but welcome. I had only applied to one program, my test scores were marginal at best compared to the ones being bandied about, and I felt nothing but a desire to flee. I was convinced I was in over my head. Some terrible administrative error must have resulted in my admission. My fear increased. I desperately tried to think of some accomplishments I could toss into the ring. Eventually I decided flee in favor of some ice cream at Stucci's across the road. I could be welcomed into the ranks another day.

"Then the disciples came to Capernaum; and when Jesus was in the house he asked them "What were you arguing about on the way?' But they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another who was the greatest."

I've always been a bit disappointed with the disciples in this passage. You'd really hope they'd been discussing something a bit more noble or important. But they are after all, human. Why do we expect anything different? One gift of the gospel is that sometimes we can see the disciples rise to the occasion. They immediately answer the call to follow Jesus. But there is also a gift in realizing a few chapters later we witness them being as petty as a bunch of new graduate students. It is a good reminder that our own capacity is often at least as variable. We are as noble and as flawed as the ones called before us.

Most of us suffer at one time or another from an inflated sense of our own importance. Helen Keller said at one point, "I long to accomplish a great and noble task, but it is my chief duty to accomplish humble tasks as though they were great and noble." There is wisdom in staying rooted in the day to day rather than always chasing our desire and ambition. But how do we answer the humble invitations of each day? How do we tolerate the ambiguity that comes so often in the present? We have to understand that our view of things is rarely the perspective of God.

The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius that formed the framework of my month long retreat this summer are often used to aid in vocational discernment. People often undertake them to clarify an important decision such as whether to pursue the religious life. They also can be made to deepen decisions already made. While I certainly counted myself in the latter category, there was still at least an unconscious expectation that God would have a lot to say about my priesthood. I would be given a roadmap. Perhaps some vision of the arc of my career, books I would write, churches I would lead, etc. I didn't even realize that this was part of what I was waiting for until the retreat unfolded.

I kept waiting for the vision, but it didn't come. Rather than getting a lot of input into my priesthood, I realized that God didn't really care much about that. God cared far more about my prayer life, my relationships with those closest to me, and my ability to stay grounded. The primary call on my life was to honor the journey with God and if priesthood helped that, fine. But any conversation that too easily led to my wondering about my own greatness was quickly cut off. The irony of that insight is that I am happier than ever to be a priest. It doesn't feel nearly so weighty and I find myself able to enjoy it rather than needing to analyze it to death.

I have also come to realize the role that fear and confusion often plays in worrying about our place in the ranks of greatness. Whether we're in the student lounge, the retreat house, the neighborhood cocktail party, or on the way to Capernaum, we often argue about our greatness when we are afraid. Afraid we are not measuring up to those around us or that we do not have the resources to bring to the tasks before us. Or we are afraid that we simply don't understand what is being asked of us in the first place.

"But they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him."

This is the verse that immediately precedes the disciple's argument about greatness. Jesus has just predicted his death and they are stunned and confused. It has been a hard week. They had a failed exorcism that required Jesus' intervention. Then they got chastised in the process. Then they continue with him only to hear that they are on a road to his certain death. They have been following Jesus with one set of expectations, and he keeps turning them upside down. Each time they think they understand what they have been called to, Jesus says, "Nope, not what I had in mind at all."

Now I understand the confusion. There was no cultural context that could have prepared them for a Messiah that would have to suffer rather than bringing a new world order through sheer strength. But what I don't understand is why they were afraid to ask him. Why couldn't they admit their confusion? Their confusion had to be rooted even more deeply in fear. They are so afraid of Jesus' death and their own vulnerability that they cannot even begin to explore what that might look like.

Like many of you, I heard the story this past week of the teenage couple who abandoned their newborn baby in a storm drain. The baby did not survive and initially I could not get beyond a feeling of pure outrage. How could they do such a thing? Why didn't they leave the baby at the hospital? Why didn't they seek help? How could anyone do such a horrible act to a child? One quote I saw from the father said, "We just didn't know what to do with the kid." What?

The more I thought about it, the angrier I became. I also knew. I knew there was no way I could ever do such a thing. Right? Thank goodness I'm better than those people.

Did you see the turn? How subtle it was? How justified anger can start to turn to self-righteous indignation? I was so caught in my horror of their action the only response I could have was to distance myself as fast as possible. I needed to be different than they were. I needed to know that under no circumstances could I commit such a horrible act of evil. The slightest thought that I could be capable of anything approaching that level of cruelty was beyond my comprehension and terrifying. I would not begin to ask Jesus what they were thinking. I don't want clarification of something like that. I just want to avoid it.

But we can't avoid the horror. Not if we want to be in the company of Jesus. Not if we want to love the world we are in rather than the one we wish we were in. Not if we answer the call to be servants of all. We can't avoid the fact that terrible things happen anymore than the disciples could avoid Jesus' suffering. Our call to service means letting go of ourselves and looking to the overlooked. What we see can be confusing and frightening.

But Jesus asks us to welcome the fear and confusion. He did not hide his fate, but tried to give his disciples the eyes to see what was coming. He asks us to see, not to scare us or to separate ourselves from it. He asks us to see it so that the power of resurrection is not lost on us. Resurrection power is so beyond our comprehension that even a baby dying in a storm drain is not beyond the love of God.

Rather than turning to ourselves for answers, what if we brought that fear and confusion to God? What if in that moment we took the risk of asking Jesus? We might not understand it any better, but we would find ourselves on different ground. Rather than arguing on the road, we would see that God's gaze is not our own. The parts of ourselves and the world that we think are beyond notice, beyond redemption are in fact welcomed. They are placed at the center. If we can release our need for greatness, we might in fact find that the less great parts of ourselves need Jesus more. And Jesus stands ready to embrace them. We just need to ask.

Amen

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