

### Who Is This?

Psalm 9: 9-20; 2 Corinthians 6: 1-13; Mark 4: 35-41

Back when mainstreaming children with special needs wasn't as common as it has become, a boy with a rare condition went through public school with the rest of the kids his age. He was tall and had a large head and long fingers, and his learning level was years behind his peers. Despite his size, in many ways he was like a very young child. Nobody quite knew how to relate to him, but it became evident one day that his classmates felt protective of him.

A new kid was in the high school. He was mischievous and brash and funny, and was making friends easily. He ran into the special-needs student for the first time in the hallway and didn't register that he was an inappropriate person to whom to make a wise-guy remark. Perhaps he only saw the usual vacant look on the other young man's face and before even noticing anything else said, "Hey, kid, welcome back from a brief vacation from reality!"

The reaction was immediate. The closest two or three guys closed in on him instantly. Passersby protested about what he had done. The loudmouth took a quick shot to the head, just hard enough to make a point, and he ducked and put his hands up and said, "I didn't know! I didn't know!"

Other kids in the school who were oddballs were belittled and bullied. Other kids who clearly weren't equipped to blend into the crowd were teased and tormented. It wasn't that there was a culture of compassion. For some reason this young man was so different, and so helpless, and so innocent, that his vulnerability touched something in his schoolmates. Kids who would laugh with cruelty at other misfits didn't laugh at him, and the bullies who picked on other kids unlikely to defend themselves defended him.

The new kid didn't know. Being irreverent had been one of the ways of impressing and ingratiating himself to his new classmates, and being reckless had worked up to then. He didn't know he was being unkind to almost the only student in school that everybody would feel the need to stick up for.

When he encountered the other teenager in the corridor, he didn't know who he had there. When I first thought of people's ignorance of who was in their midst, I thought in terms of Ugly Duckling stories, the people nobody noticed in high school who went on to become glamorous and successful. There was one of those in that high school class, too, a young woman who'd grown from an overweight little kid into an overweight teen and who reversed herself between graduation and the tenth reunion to become the state's Take Off Pounds Sensibly group's biggest success. Hers was one of those reunion fantasy stories, where all the classmates are astonished and impressed by what one's made of oneself.

That doesn't apply well, however, to the psalm. In the psalm, those who are victimized by others' contempt and cruelty don't escape their powerlessness. They do not,

like an Ugly Duckling, discover a new self which puts past reaction to shame. They are more like the tall kid who got on the bus with his lunch packed, not in a paper bag like his classmates, but in a little kid's metal lunch box. They were marked by vulnerability, and there was nothing to change that. The most they could hope for was that their innocence would get them some kind of protection, and failing that protection, that their becoming victims would be avenged.

The psalm has this perspective: That the lowly, the despised, those so unimportant to the prosperous and powerful that their sufferings aren't regarded and their rights not acknowledged, are wards of heaven. Though their fellow human beings ignore them, God knows them, and though their fellow human beings feel nothing in common with them, God loves them.

That's the message of the psalm, and it's a warning. It's the same warning Jesus repeats in the twenty-fifth chapter of Matthew's gospel, when he tells the story of Judgment Day, and the separation of the sheep from the goats. Those who will be blessed are those who have recognized God's claim on behalf of the needy, and those who will suffer are those who have felt no need to show compassion to strangers. In that parable those who have failed to do what God requires say the same thing as the wise guy: "I didn't know!" When the downtrodden and desperate of their generation needed support, they didn't know who they had there.

In Paul's letter to the Corinthians there is also the theme of their not realizing who they have, but it's different. Paul himself is the one who has been misunderstood. Members of the Corinthian church have questioned Paul's integrity, they have been led by some of Paul's critics and rivals to doubt Paul's value as a leader.

Paul is not powerless. He is intelligent and he is eloquent, and he makes a good defense of himself. How could they suspect him of unworthy motives or selfish intent, when he has suffered so much for the gospel? If nothing else, they have to admit that he has a passion to promulgate the good news of Christ, because he has paid dearly for it. What kind of return is he now receiving from those to whom he gave the good news? Is it right for them to make him suffer, just as if they also were opponents of the spread of God's kingdom?

Paul's merit, his single-mindedness and self-sacrifice, have been forgotten. Once the Corinthians recognized him as a person sent from God. Once they were moved by his words and encouraged by his attention. Once they loved and respected him for the qualities he possessed, but distance, and difficulty, and the seductive power of more polished or wiliier influences, have opened a breach. They still have Paul, but they no longer know who it is they have in him. He reminds them of who he is, and what he's worth, in this letter.

There are lots of persons serving as Paul to the current church of Christ. Popes and bishops and preachers, scholars and pundits and poets all plead for a hearing, sure that it will secure our souls to adopt their perspective. This passage in First Corinthians confirms something we already know, and that is that some guides are better than others. It also reminds us to think hard about who it is we will follow. With some evidence from the lives of persons professing Christian wisdom, we can better know who it is they are.

The gospel story takes the whole theme to a higher level. It is no longer God making the point that the least of these abroad in the world are remembered by God. It is no longer someone like Paul making the point that a life of suffering difficulty for one's principles should earn the consideration of others. It is an incident in the life of Jesus' disciples which demonstrates how hard it is for a human being to recognize the presence of God, and how little we can comprehend the meaning of incarnation.

Already in the gospel Jesus has become such a miraculous healer that he's thronged wherever he goes. He has spoken up without hesitation for his understanding of God's will in the face of established authority, and has established himself as a charismatic teacher. He has possessed a quality that made the disciples give up their former lives in order to share his journeys. They admire him, they are astonished by him. They are happy to be seen as chosen by him, and they want to live up to the role of insiders in his circle, those to whom the parables are explained.

What would they tell someone at this point about Jesus? That he is a wonder worker, a holy man, a great man? Would they say that they love the way Jesus sees things, that they find hope and courage from his example and his teaching?

No matter how deeply they understand Jesus' merit and mastery and their own humility beside him, they don't know who they have there. The storm on the lake, and Jesus' response to their fear and to the storm itself, make them realize how little they grasp who he is. Jesus is surprised by their panic, by the fact that they don't see who he is, that they don't see how it is when he is there.

Here, as so often in the gospel, the identity of Jesus is exposed, not when he chooses, but when he is met by other people's needs. A crisis reveals the person who perhaps has not been doing anything to disguise himself, but has not been perceived for his true worth by the ordinary lights of everyday. The storm strips the fishermen of trust in their mastery, and forces them to turn to their Lord. Jesus turns out to be more help than they can comprehend.

There are people here this morning who will say that this is their story, too. They were drawn to Jesus, they felt privileged to essay discipleship. Christ's heart for the suffering encouraged them, and Christ's vision of human community inspired them. Without thinking about it too much, journeying with Jesus in their life gave them a sense that they knew who he was. Then something threatening happened, and the Christ to whom they turned in desperation was able to do more than they hoped. Their Lord was bigger than they guessed.

It is our nature to make too much of ourselves and too little of others. The Bible urges us to overcome this tendency by reminding us that God loves those we despise. It shows us even the apostle Paul misunderstood and discounted, and Jesus puzzled at how little those closest to him know who he is. Life, however, does not permit us always to be indifferent to the meek, or unaware of the power of God. Thank God that Christ is revealed in the love he brings to bear on behalf of those in need.