

Pentecost 17 – September 20, 2015

Text: Mark 9:30-37

Theme: “Does Anyone Know Where We’re Going?”

Years ago, in the dark of night, outside of a small, desolate town in Northern Idaho someone heard about from their 3rd cousin, twice removed from the neighbor’s barber. Now this is before the days of GPS and Mr. Rand McNally was a little sketchy on the roads in this particular part of Idaho. Finally, after wandering for ½ an hour I realized that I had no idea where we were. So, I pulled the van over, turned around in the driver’s seat and I asked the passengers if anyone knew where we were going or how to get there. There was deafening silence. I asked again,

“Does anyone know how to get to the restaurant?” and they all stared back at me like deer in the headlights. Not one of them had any clue and I understood childlike faith. When we are young, we put absolute faith in the adult in charge. It never occurs to us that the person in whom we trust might not know exactly what to do and when to do it. Only after years of being disappointed in our leaders do we begin to believe that they may not know any more than we do. In fact, most of us go through a time when we begin to doubt everything and everybody.

Those of you who have raised kids know how stupid you become as they grow to years older than mine. One day, when two of his three were

teenagers, he was bemoaning the fact that he had become so stupid. At the time, Neal and Noah were 7 and 2 and, as we talked in front of my house, they were jumping up and down in the living room window yelling Daddy's home! I told my stupid friend to look at that window and remember that though now he is as dumb as a box of hammers, once, he was a god.

Faith has a similar growth cycle. When faith is newly-born, it is strong and faith looks to God for everything. We have a child-like faith when we are little children. One of the reasons it is rewarding to teach little children in Sunday School and Preschool is because there is no doubt, just complete acceptance of everything God says. But as we grow in years we begin to want to do it ourselves. Then we reward children for being able to do things for themselves. They get stars and treats and verbal praise for everything from going to the bathroom to eating their carrots, but one thing we can never do for ourselves is our salvation. It is hard to explain that to a child. For, salvation, we always look to God alone. The belief that we can have faith or create faith on our own is actually unbelief. It is discounting the work of the Holy Spirit and devaluating the death of Christ on the cross. If you can save yourself, why did Christ have to die? If you can come to faith in Christ yourself, are you then as powerful as the Holy Spirit? This is a mystery that confuses us the

rest of our lives. The Devil plays on our pride in our achievements and abilities. YAY! Look at you! You're a big boy now and you can do all kinds of good works that surely earn you a gold star! In our Gospel today, the disciples became caught in this trap as well.

The disciples had been with Jesus for a couple of years by now and they were feeling pretty good about their faith. Some began to think that they had increased their own faith, so they began to argue about who would be first in the kingdom of heaven. Whose first and whose better are arguments that are indicative of weakening faith. Faith is inversely proportional to works. As we place more confidence in ourselves, our own works, our faith in God weakens and that is the path to faith death. Conversely, the more we rely on God to handle every aspect of our lives, the stronger our faith becomes and the more we crave his Word and Sacrament, which in turn strengthens faith even more.

Unlike me, and those poor unfortunate souls in the youth van wandering through need to focus on which one of us is greater or lesser than another because we all came to where we are by following the same path. We were all brought to faith by the power of the Holy Spirit working through Baptismal water and God's Word. That faith has been nourished and strengthened throughout our lives with God's Word and Sacrament. And none of us are where we are now by our own

doing. So who is the greatest? Jesus Christ is the greatest, and we are all equally in his debt for giving his life and soul for us. Be okay with that. Just happily embrace the gift. I know it goes completely against our ideas of self-sufficiency and pulling ourselves up by the bootstraps, but you can't find your own way out of this maze. Just relax and let God drive. He has prepared a place just for us and he knows exactly where he is going.