

October 17, 2021
Lectionary 29, Year B
The Twenty-first Sunday after Pentecost
Mark 10:35-45
Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Norwood, MA
Pastor Amanda L. Warner

Invitation to Opposite Land

I don't remember how old Julia was when what I'm about to describe to you was going on.

She was old enough to be toddling around on her own two legs, but she was still pretty young, probably still old enough for her age to be counted in months, not years; maybe somewhere between 18 months and two years old. Old enough still to be put in a playpen on the porch at our old house in Brookfield for her own safety, but also old enough to demand to be taken out so that she could go play in the yard.

I might not remember exactly how old she was, but I have a very clear picture in my head of her little toddler self, dressed in a onesie, inside the house, standing and banging on our front door and demanding to go "In."

I was not sure what I could do for her. After all, she already was in. She couldn't get much more in than she was.

I told her she was in. Her cries escalated "In."

Again, I reassured her that she was in. Still, she cried to go "In".

I don't remember exactly how that particular incident was resolved, but I do know that a few days later, when I had Abigail and Julia playing outside in the yard, Julia toddled up to our front door, and started banging on it and shouting "Out."

I think that that was the moment that I realized that our little Julia had in and out mixed up. When she was inside and wanted to go outside, she said, "In" and when she was outside and wanted to go inside, she said, "Out".

It seemed like a simple enough mistake for a little one, just learning to explore her world, and just learning to talk to make.

But then we started to notice that Julia, who, like most children, had said some variation of our names, “Mommy” and “Daddy” as two of her earliest words, had started to call Britton “Mommy” and me “Daddy”. That seemed a little strange.

And she started doing it with my parents too, calling Grandpa, “Grandma” and Grandma “Grandpa”.

We had some very difficult moments while we figured out that when Julia wanted to be picked up, she said, “Down” and when she wanted to be put down, she said, “Up.”

Imagine us trying to explain that she was up, to the increasingly agitated child shouting, “Up, up,” as we held her in our arms.

It didn’t take us too long to figure out that Julia was living in opposite land, which means that whatever she said she wanted, she actually wanted the opposite. She had things backwards, down was up, up was down, in was out and out was in.

Like I said, I don’t remember how old she was when this phenomenon took place. I also don’t remember how long it lasted. I know that it didn’t last long enough for us to become truly worried that she had a wire permanently crossed.

It was only probably a couple of weeks before some synapse fired in her brain and her opposites realigned themselves.

I became mommy again, Britton went back to being daddy, in became in, out became out, up became up again, and down, down.

It only took a couple of weeks, before everything was fine again, but let me tell you, it was a confusing couple of weeks, as we adjusted to understanding Julia backwards. And then, of course, it was a huge relief once we figured out that she was using English in a way that we more readily understood again.

I don’t know if you’ve noticed, but we’ve been reading almost straight through chapters nine and ten of the gospel of Mark for the past few weeks.

It started on September 19th, when we read Mark 9:30-37, and we’ve continued from there straight through today’s gospel reading, Mark 10:35-45.

Just as a note, our readthrough will continue next week with Mark 10:46-52 and that will take us to the end of chapter 10 of Mark's gospel.

When I was looking at the gospel reading assigning for today, in the context of the other gospel readings that we've had for the past month, something stood out for me, and it was that Jesus spent these two chapters in Mark's gospel in opposite land. Only he wasn't confused. He knew what he was saying and he meant it.

There's an interesting parallel in today's gospel reading and the gospel reading that we had a month ago, on September 19th.

In that gospel reading, Mark 9:30-37, Jesus tells his disciples about what will happen to him in Jerusalem. He tells them that once he is there he will be betrayed and killed and in three days rise again.

Mark 9:32 says, "But [his disciples] did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him."

After Jesus shares that news with his disciples, his closest friends and companions, they spend the rest of their journey that day arguing with each other about which one of them is the greatest disciple.

Clearly, they didn't get the message, which is, perhaps, why Jesus gives it to them again.

It's not part of today's gospel reading, but it's right before it, so I'll share it with you so that you can see the parallel.

Our gospel reading for today is Mark 10:35-45. This what comes right before it, Mark 10:32-34:

They were on the road, going up to Jerusalem....Jesus took the twelve aside again and began to tell them what was to happen to him, saying, 'See, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be handed over to the chief priests and the scribes, and they will condemn him to death; then they

will hand him over to the Gentiles; they will mock him, and spit upon him, and flog him, and kill him; and after three days he will rise again.’

It’s almost the same message that Jesus shared with them in chapter 9, but they have a similar failure to absorb what Jesus is telling them here as they did there, because once again, they have the opposite kind of reaction than you would expect Jesus’ closest friends to have to the news that he was going to suffer and die.

Today’s gospel tells us that immediately after hearing the news about Jesus’s suffering and death, two of his first disciples and closest friends, James and John, come to Jesus and try to get him to promise them something before they will even tell him what it is. Mark 10:35- 37 says this:

James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came forward to him and said to him, “Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you.” And he said to them, “What is it you want me to do for you?” And they said to him, “Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory.”

Clearly, James and John, and the other disciples did not understand the story that Jesus was telling.

Jesus’ message about his own life isn’t one about greatness or glory, or at least not about any kind of greatness or glory that doesn’t come through a path of suffering and obedience.

But for some reason his disciples persist in thinking about the opposite of what Jesus actually said to them in both of these instances from chapters 9 and 10 of Mark’s gospel.

But I said earlier in this sermon that it was Jesus who was living in opposite land, not his disciples and it is true.

In both of these parallel situations, the one where Jesus tells his disciples about his suffering and death and they start arguing about their own greatness and the one where Jesus tells his disciples about his suffering and death and two of them ask for places of

honor for themselves when he comes to glory, Jesus corrects them by inviting them to live in opposite land, in a world turned upside down.

In Mark 9:35, in order to silence the debate about who is the greatest, Jesus said, “Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.”

In today’s gospel, in Mark 10:43b-44, Jesus says, “....but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all.”

But that’s not all. In the last week’s gospel reading, when Peter pointed out to Jesus, what Jesus no doubt knew full well, that he, Peter, and the other disciples had left everything and followed him (Mark 10:28) Jesus responded with another opposite, “But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first’ (Mark 10:31)

So, Mark, chapters 9-10, is an invitation to live in opposite land. The first are called to be last. Leaders are supposed to be servants.

In today’s gospel reading, Jesus draws a contrast between the ways of the world and the way that he wants his people to live and interact.

In Mark 10:42b-43a Jesus says, “You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them.

But it is not so among you....”

In the text of this sermon, I have those words, “But it is not so among you,” bolded, underlined, and highlighted in bright yellow. They’re that important.

Jesus was telling his disciples that they were supposed to be different from the world around them; that they were supposed to do the opposite of what they saw modeled for them in the hierarchies of the world.

Jesus goes on to tell them that those who will be great and first among Jesus’ followers will be those who are servants, those who follow the example that is set by Jesus, who said of himself in today’s gospel reading, “For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mark 10:45).

Over and over again in chapters 9 and 10 in the gospel of Mark, Jesus tells his disciples that he is on the path of sacrifice, and over and over again his disciples fail to grasp his message and fail to take him as a model.

Jesus calls them to live differently from the world around them, to live in such a way that the weak and powerless are honored and protected and those with status give up their place to those who the world says are nothing.

At the beginning of this sermon, I said that when Julia was calling everything its opposite, she probably had some kind of wire crossed or needed a synapse to fire in her brain to get things straightened out, and we were relieved when she switched things back around and got her ins and outs and ups and downs right.

But Jesus, Jesus isn't confused. Jesus doesn't have a wire crossed. There's no synapse that needs to fire in his brain.

It's not his role, it's not his job, it's not his intention to make his words conform to the world.

Instead, the change of heart, the straightening out that needs to happen, the synapse that needs to fire is in us. It's in Jesus' disciples, back then and still today, so that we can take to heart the words of Jesus, "But it is not so among you."

Those words tell us that we are called to live differently, to live in joyful service to the world around us with whatever we have to give, whether it is a lot of time, of money, of energy, of skill, of power, or a little of all of those things.

With whatever we have with whatever we are, Jesus invites us to live in opposite land because that's where Jesus lives.

And where Jesus lives, is the best place to be, because that's where we'll find life, and find it abundantly. Amen.