“Be Not Afraid”
Mark 9:30-37

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From the Pulpit
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May your word, O Lord, be a lamp to our feet and a light to our path. Amen.

Have you ever felt insecure? Have you ever been vulnerable? Have you ever been afraid to ask a question because you felt like you should know the answer or were afraid people would think less of your intelligence for asking? Have you ever been in a class or part of a conversation where you had no idea what everyone was talking about but didn’t want to speak up and ask for clarity? Or maybe you misunderstood and felt incredibly foolish afterwards. Did you feel like you were somehow lesser in that moment? Did you feel small and alone? If you’re worried this only happens to you it doesn’t. We’ve all been there.

I remember being in an English class once and the teacher was talking about the existential themes that the author worked with and I had no idea what existentialism was. I didn’t say anything at first because I thought the teacher might explain it, or someone else would ask, or maybe we’d just move on and talk about other things. Well pretty soon we’re 30 minutes in and we’re still on existentialism and I’m no closer to figuring out what it is. At this point it’s way too late for me to ask. What was I going to say? “Hi, yes, pardon me, but can you just go back to the beginning and explain what existentialism is and then re-do
this class?” I felt like I was the only one in the room who wasn’t an expert on existentialism and I was too afraid to say anything. The whole class went by and I never said a word. I had to go home and Google existentialism to try and figure out what had gone on that day.

It isn’t just a lack of knowledge that makes us insecure. Sometimes it can be a misunderstanding. A friend says to me, “I read an article this morning about healthy cake.” My response is, “Oh cool, I’d be interested to hear more. Was it some kind of organic, vegan cake or something?” A pause, and then, “Dude, it was a satire piece.” Oops. Or maybe you’ve been that person who excitedly texted a friend or relative about the article you saw online about Harry Potter 8, only to send another text a few minutes later that the article was published on April Fool’s Day and to disregard the previous message. So often we feel insecure and vulnerable. So often we misunderstand. So often we’re afraid to ask a question. So often we run from our vulnerability. That’s why the disciples in Mark have a relate-ability that you don’t find in the other gospels nearly as much.

If you were here last week, you heard an earlier passage from Mark that is very similar to the reading today, where Jesus asks the disciples who people say he is. The disciples say Elijah, or John the Baptist, or a prophet, and Peter
correctly identifies him as the Messiah. Jesus then tells them about his coming death and resurrection. When he does, the disciples do not understand at all. Peter begins to rebuke Jesus and tell him off and Jesus gets angry with him. Jesus tells Peter, “Get behind me Satan!” That passage from last week falls at the beginning of a section of Mark that is significant. It spans chapters 8 through 10 and is framed by two stories of healing a blind person. These two stories of blindness help tell us, as the reader, that this section of Mark is about not seeing. Last week’s reading is the first of three times that Jesus predicts his death and resurrection in this section of Mark. Today’s reading is the second time that Jesus predicts his death and resurrection. The third comes later in the gospel. In each of these episodes Jesus tells the disciples who he is and what will happen to him and all three times the disciples fail to understand. They are blind, like the blind people that frame this section.

You might be wondering why Jesus picked such an incompetent group of disciples but their blindness has always given me a measure of comfort. It’s why the disciples are so relatable in Mark, and it goes back to the insecurity that I often find myself battling that I am somehow lesser than those around me. All those moments in life when I didn’t understand suddenly groups me in with these disciples. We aren’t the only ones who fail to understand
things. If Jesus loved those twelve who never seemed to understand him then he’s probably got a spot in his heart for me, too.

The failure to understand isn’t the only noteworthy part of our reading today, though. The last part of verse 32 says the disciples “were afraid to ask him,” meaning Jesus. Why were they afraid? Again, I think we can identify with this feeling. Maybe they didn’t want to look stupid. Maybe they felt like they ought to know what he was talking about. Maybe they were afraid of the answers they might get if they asked. All three of these possibilities seem plausible to me, but the final one is probably the most significant. Maybe they didn’t ask because they were afraid of the answer. What Jesus is talking about is the ultimate end game. He is talking about something so significant that the disciples are afraid to even think about it. What Jesus says is world altering. It is universe bending. This changes everything. On some level I think the disciples are afraid to ask Jesus what he means because they don’t like where this is headed. You mean our leader, our mentor, is going to die? This path that we’ve started on ends in sadness and death? It is a lot easier to pretend that Jesus didn’t say anything at all than to ask questions about it and be forced to ponder the possibilities. Isn’t that a familiar feeling?
Look around at the world we live in. Look at all of the war, the racial tensions, the struggle that LGBTQ people still have to endure, the giant wealth disparity, the climate change, and so much more. Isn’t it a lot easier to pretend it’s not happening than to start asking questions and be forced to confront the issues all around us? I think we all like some amount of comfort in our lives and when we start asking the hard questions that comfort is put in serious jeopardy because we probably won’t like what we find. It takes a lot of courage, a lot of faith, to make yourself vulnerable and begin exploring the challenging issues.

The fear to ask questions, the desire to stay in our own, safe bubbles, is ours, and the disciples’, blindness. Just like the disciples we are blinded by our own fears. We are blinded by our desire to remain happy and comfortable and ignore that which challenges our comfort. Let us not be blind like the disciples. Someone has to get up and ask the hard questions. Someone has to be willing to challenge our constructed norms. Someone has to get beyond the fear and step into faith. So often in Mark’s gospel fear is the opposite of faith and at some point we all have to make the leap from fear to faith. That can be a very hard thing to do. Part of making that leap means coming to a place where we feel comfortable asking the hard questions and exploring the things that make us uneasy. In our vulnerability we find our
strength. In vulnerability we find faith. In vulnerability we find love.

A couple was having relationship issues recently. There were a number of issues that no one wanted to bring up and address. They were afraid to talk about the problems because saying it out loud would effectively burst their comfortable bubble and throw them headlong into the raging seas of vulnerability. Even though both partners were hurting there was still some semblance of control as long as the issues remained unspoken. They could still pretend there weren’t any big problems. Ironically, though, in their effort to not talk about the issues and save themselves pain, they were actually just creating more pain, and not alleviating any of it. They needed to step out of the shadow of fear and into the realm of faith. That meant making themselves vulnerable by voicing their concerns and opening up the possibility that what they encountered in that space would upend their world. Their worst fears could be realized, but in that moment of opening themselves up and becoming vulnerable they encountered love, and not those fears. They had faith in each other and in God that when they spoke their concerns they would be greeted by love and they were. They cast off their blindness, they stepped out of their bubbles, and they made themselves vulnerable and in
that moment faith and love triumphed. Be not afraid. Have faith.

Brene Brown did a TED talk back in 2010 about vulnerability and I want to share some of it today. In the course of her research she kept encountering vulnerability and wanted to learn more about it. Here is some of what she found:

She reports, “So this is what I learned. We numb vulnerability… I sent something out on Twitter and on Facebook that said, "How would you define vulnerability? What makes you feel vulnerable?" And within an hour and a half, I had 150 responses. Because I wanted to know what's out there.” People responded, “Having to ask my husband for help because I'm sick and we're newly married; initiating sex; being turned down; asking someone out; waiting for the doctor to call back; getting laid off; laying [someone] off. This is the world we live in. We live in a vulnerable world. And one of the ways we deal with it is we numb vulnerability.

“The problem is -- and I learned this from the research -- that you cannot selectively numb emotion. You can't say here's the bad stuff. Here's vulnerability, here's grief, here's shame, here's fear, here's disappointment. I don't want to feel these. I'm going to have a couple of beers and a banana nut muffin… You can't numb those hard feelings without
numbing the other emotions. You cannot selectively numb. So when we numb those, we numb joy, we numb gratitude, we numb happiness. And then, we are miserable, and we are looking for purpose and meaning, and then we feel vulnerable [again], so then we have a couple of beers and a banana nut muffin. And it becomes this dangerous cycle.

“[So] this is what I have found: To let ourselves be seen, deeply seen, vulnerably seen ... to love with our whole hearts, even though there's no guarantee... to practice gratitude and joy in those moments of terror, when we're wondering, "Can I love you this much? Can I believe in this passionately? Can I be this fierce about this?" just to be able to stop, and instead of catastrophizing what might happen, to say, "I'm just so grateful, because to feel this vulnerable means I'm alive." And the last, which I think is probably the most important, is to believe that we're enough. Because when we work from a place that says, "I'm enough" ... then we stop screaming and start listening, we're kinder and gentler to the people around us, and we're kinder and gentler to ourselves.”
Each one of us is enough. Each one of us has deep vulnerability, but it is that space within that opens us up to love. Sometimes we are blinded by the appeal of comfort and don’t want to embrace that vulnerability but when we do our eyes are opened. When we shed our blinders and open ourselves up we find love. A love from God that embraces us forever and always. Bask in that love and be not afraid, knowing that you are enough. Amen.

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