

Job 38:1-7, (34-41)
Psalm 104:1-9, 25, 37b
Hebrews 5:1-10
Mark 10:35-45

Homecoming. The word itself strikes lots of feelings in each of us. Most of us have several different kinds of homes that we can dream of coming back to. There's the home we grew up in with our family of origin. There are the schools we attended and the family of friends that we made there. There are neighborhoods that we've lived in where we felt at home among our neighbors. And there are our church families. Coming back to see old friends who have shared so much of our faith journey and our lives with us is a special kind of homecoming. We've made memories in these places and they hold a special place in our hearts. We were also shaped by these families in our history. Each one had something different to offer us and something different to teach us. There were multiple experiences there that left their mark on each one of us. And sibling rivalry is present in each one of these situations. No matter which family we think of or which family we are in, most of us spend lots of time trying to figure out where and how we fit in. We all want to make a place for ourselves. It's part of our human DNA and it has to do with our sense of security and perhaps even our sense of survival. Is there room for me here? Where do I fit? Am I important to the rest of the family? It rarely occurs to any of us, consciously or unconsciously, to consider the role of humility as we jockey for position. But being truly humble...embracing humility...is one of Jesus' strongest messages to us.

Today's Gospel sets out to share with us the all too human frailty of seeking glory rather than submission to God's will. The portion of the Gospel of Mark that we just heard is actually in the middle of the story of the little family of followers who are with Jesus on his way to Jerusalem. In today's Gospel, Jesus shares with them...for the third time...what will happen to him when they reach Jerusalem. He will be handed over to those who have human power in this society. He will be mocked and beaten, spat upon and crucified and on the third day he will rise from the dead.

This little band of followers can't hear what he's telling them. The first time he makes this prediction is right after Peter has identified him as the Son of God. Peter's reply to the prediction is a protest for which Jesus soundly rebukes him. The second time Jesus makes this prediction, the disciples seem to take it in but as they continue their walk toward Jerusalem, they begin to argue among themselves about which one of them is the greatest! They seem to have missed the point altogether. This third prediction falls on deaf ears as well and James and

John skip right over the worst parts of it and ask Jesus if they can have the places of honor next to Jesus...one on his left and one on his right. Little do they know that those places of honor do not happen in a throne room somewhere in a banquet hall, but on the two crosses...one on either side of Jesus and they will be occupied by two thieves who are also being crucified. Perhaps James and John are remembering their experience at the top of the mountain when Jesus was transfigured. They saw him with Moses and Elijah in all their glory and Jesus glorified with them. That's what they want for themselves now. That's what they're asking for, but they have no idea the price Jesus will pay for that kind of glory. And they have no inkling of the total submission to the will of God that Jesus is willing to make.

But we can't hear what we can't bear...and neither can they. The disciples are all too human and they mess it up three times in a row! This little family of Jesus' followers glosses right over what is too painful to contemplate. Jesus is the head of this little family and no one can take in the information that something horrible is going to happen to the head of the family. Not possible. It's understandable that each one of them probably wants to secure a place close to Jesus...always. It's scary to think about trying to go on without the head of the family. It's terrifying to think of being without Jesus. They may very well be less concerned with elevating themselves as they are about remaining close to Jesus.

Like all families, this little family of followers has its own share of jockeying for position with one another. And like all families, this little family has its share of pain and hurt feelings and squabbles. We hear about them from time to time as we read the gospels, but we generally don't focus on them. Sibling rivalry among the disciples never seems to be the main point. But this little family of followers carries within it the seeds of what will become the church when Jesus has ascended to heaven. This little family of followers is very much like our own church families that are scattered all over the world.

Inside each church family are all the joys and all the heartaches that go along with family life and with church life. These church families are not perfect because they are populated with frail human beings. And because we are frail, we sometimes find ourselves jockeying for position within our own church family. Where do we fit? Will we have a place of honor or influence? Will we be cared for? Will we be important? Will anyone take our needs into account? Those are all good questions. And as we try to find answers for them, we sometimes bump into one another. Our feelings get hurt or perhaps we hurt someone else. These experiences are all part of being human. Even the disciples had to contend with these things. And they suffered tremendously when one of their own, Judas, betrayed the head of the family, Jesus, and left them all bereft and frightened and in mourning. That was a horrible hurt and probably beyond the kind of hurt any of us have experienced in our own churches. But almost

all of us have been wounded in church. And some of us have survived a traumatic experience or two in church...and lived to tell about it. Healing from a church trauma takes a lot of time and a lot of courage and a lot of prayer. It's particularly hard in a church family because all of us seek safety within our church family. We're supposed to feel safe in church...with the people who worship with us and the people we see every week and the people we share our lives with.

But after the trauma of Judas' betrayal and Jesus' crucifixion, the little family of followers didn't give up. And even when they encountered the resurrected Jesus, they were both overjoyed and confused and still frightened. But they remembered what Jesus taught them about loving God and caring for each other. They stuck together. And even though they were terrified and feared for their lives, they remembered what Jesus had commanded of them: "Love one another as I have loved you!" Jesus still makes that command of us. Love one another as I have loved you.

Our church families, much like our families of origins, provide a place for us to experiment and to learn and to practice what Jesus taught us to do. We are frail and we are human and we are going to make mistakes, but when we love God and we love Jesus Christ, we are given the opportunity to love one another in our church family. We get to practice forgiveness even when there is no apology. That's hard to do. But sometimes the person who has offended us doesn't even realize that we've been hurt! The church family, just like our families of origin, is here to provide us with a laboratory in which we can experiment and try to do all the things that Jesus taught us to do. And the first thing he taught his disciples...and that he taught by example...was humility. The first thing we learned from Jesus was to be obedient to God...to submit to God's will...to forgive others in the same way that we wish to be forgiven by God. And to be a servant and a slave to others. We know we're on the right track when we find ourselves worrying about someone else's needs more than our own.

Regardless of how hard it might be at times, there is still much joy and love in families...in our church families and in our families of origin. Within these families we love and laugh. We make memories. We form strong bonds with one another. We share our triumphs as well as our tragedies. We make a home with one another. We look after one another. We go out into the world together to share the Good News. And we know that we belong.

And that's what makes all homecomings so very sweet!

Thanks be to God.

AMEN.