

Mark 9: 30-37 "A God Who Fits Our Religion" Rev. Janet Chapman 9/12/21

Antonio Salieri was a religious man, a man very serious about his faith. He is the protagonist in Peter Shaffer's novel and the film made from it, *Amadeus*. From his childhood, Salieri wanted to be a world-class composer; he wanted to, as he put it, make music and bring glory to his God. So, while a young boy, Salieri offered the boldest prayer he can imagine: "Dear Lord, make me a great composer. Let me celebrate your glory through music, and be celebrated myself. Make me famous throughout the world, dear God. Make me immortal. After I die, let people speak my name forever with love for what I wrote. In return, I will give you my chastity, my industry, my deepest humility, every hour of my life. Amen." Such was the devotion of Antonio Salieri. And over the years, in various events such as the death of his father, which forces his family to move to Vienna, the city of musicians, and in the opportunity to be the court composer for the music-loving emperor of Austria, Antonio is convinced that he is witnessing the answer to his old prayer, and so his faith in God is great. God has accepted his offer and his faith becomes verified by his success. So each time he takes one more step toward the fame and glory he craves, Salieri turns his face to the small crucifix on the wall near his piano and says *Grazie, Signor*, Thank you, sir. But then God defaults on the loan. Salieri's star stops rising. Worse than that, Salieri's glory is sloughed off for a new face on the scene – a boorish, arrogant, vulgar genius who shows up in Vienna: Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, Salieri soon realizes that his gift is mediocre next to Mozart and so all he desired from life will go to another, to a man who has not dedicated himself to anything but pleasure, to a man not worthy of such wondrous talent.

So Salieri prays again, this time a very different prayer: "From now on, God, we are enemies, you and I. Because you chose for your instrument a boastful, lustful, smutty infantile boy, and give me for reward only the ability to recognize the incarnation. Because you are unjust and unkind I will block you, I swear it (it is the equivalent of being unfriended these days)." The crucifix goes into the fireplace; the life dedication to industry, chastity, and humility becomes one dedicated to destroying a brighter light. Salieri spends his days cursing and opposing the God who failed to proceed according to his place, the God who deigned to bless Amadeus. Antonio Salieri was a religious man, and it showed- it showed in church, in prayer, in

the crucifix over the piano. Yet it is exactly that religion that gets in the way of Antonio Salieri. Within all of his gussied-up, good-looking, pious religion, there is that drive to raise himself above others, to glorify himself over the rest under the guise of doing it for God.

It is a story played out again and again over human history. Dare I say just such a story hit movie theatres this weekend entitled “The Eyes of Tammy Faye”? Maybe we have seen such a story personally? The bigger one grows in popularity, the more difficult it becomes to protect our values. When we read some of the stories of the disciples, it can be easy for us to criticize, to take the approach, “Those dummies, I would have caught on so much faster to what Jesus was teaching.” As I shared last Sunday, the picture of the disciples in Mark is the least flattering one we have, but that is not due to a lack of devotion. They are filled with enthusiasm. After all, they left everything behind to follow Jesus. As James Van Tholen notes, we should be careful therefore not to take on a “holier-than-Peter” attitude because these folks were truly religious. But religion itself, even the religion led by Christ, can get in the way and in Mark 9, it does.

At the beginning of our text, Jesus talking about his betrayal, suffering and death. It is not the first time the subject has come up but this time, there’s no scolding from the disciples to stop talking like that, just a very confused look. Their silence speaks volumes as they are too afraid to ask what he really means. Arriving in Capernaum, Jesus recognizes a teachable moment and asks what they were arguing about it earlier. They are embarrassed or maybe too proud to say. Maybe they don’t want to admit they don’t agree with what Jesus was saying so they resort to what they do know – holding power in the palm of your hand like Augustus or Herod do, coming out on top, dominating the world around you. They are like youngsters who have been caught in the act of doing something Mommy or Daddy won’t like and they hang their heads. Jesus has just proclaimed that suffering and death lie ahead for him and are essential to his calling as God’s savior and they are focused on who is the greatest – talk about complete opposite motivations. But Jesus knows already the topic of discussion and so he does what we might call experiential learning, street theatre at its best. He takes a youngster in his lap and hugs the child. In that society, it would have been a controversial move to say the least. Children were seen as the least powerful, insignificant, and the very opposite of the greatest.

He defines for the disciples that in welcoming this child, they not only welcome Jesus but they welcome the One who sent Jesus, the God of all Creation. This definitely did not fit into the disciples view of God, their religion if you will.

A few years back at a Gay Pride event here in Redding, I couldn't help myself but approach one of the protesters who held a judgmental and hateful sign and state flatly, "May God forgive you for what you are doing." He responded, "We obviously worship different Gods." Jesus knows we can be a bit tough to teach so he uses the imagery of the child more than once to help turn the tables on abusive religion which is in direct contrast to following in his footsteps. In Matthew 18, Jesus says "unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven." Note that it doesn't say unless you become childish, which the disciples and so many of us have down pat, but it says unless you become childlike – there is a huge difference. Then in Mark 10, Jesus says, "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these." Jesus is saying that real power is in vulnerability which is similar to that of a child. A child has no clout, no pull, and no influence to improve anyone's standing. Brian McLaren notes that to imitate a child is to live with the joy and knowledge that we are all simply and equally human beings loved by God rather than constantly striving to move up the ladder of success, trying to be something we are not, working for titles and honors that try and define us. To live as a child is to live free of the self-justifications that adults use to prove their worth as well as to be freed from that heavy burden of self-consciousness concerning our status in the world. To live like a child, says Jesus, is the only way to enter God's realm. In turn, Jesus is inviting us to welcome every person as a child without regard for external measures that define their importance.

Yet we can imagine complete confusion at this point from the disciples because how does anyone welcome someone who has nothing to offer, nothing to give back in response to our hospitality? There is no question that the disciples are still fully devoted to Jesus because they believe in him and in him, they will find greatness. They know him to be the Messiah and they know the Messiah has great things in store for them and their followers. Their religion tells them so and it is their religion that keeps them from understanding the words of Jesus or welcoming the kingdom of God. I must tell you also that their religion at this point has nothing

to do with being Jewish. In their insistence upon becoming great, they have turned their backs on the faith of their birth which advocates for the love, care and support of others, especially the vulnerable. They have forgotten the prophets' teachings about giving only to those who can return a gift in kind. They have created a God to fit their own religion. As Martin Buber wrote, "religion can hide from us the face of God as nothing else can." So all of us have to learn to get past our religion and seek God like a child.

There once was a group of kindergartners in Sunday School who were learning the Lord's Prayer but were having problems getting the really big words. One child thought she was ready to give it a try. She started out, "Our Father, who art in heaven, how'd you know my name?" Such is the sweet humility, curiosity, and wonder of a child, such is the kingdom of God. Thanks be to God, Amen.