

The Rev. Christine Love Mendoza
The Church of the Good Shepherd
The Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost – September 19, 2021
Mark 9:30-37

As we are coming up on our Shrine Mont Parish Weekend this coming Friday, I've begun excitedly anticipating the mountain views. As many of you know, I am not hardly a great lover of the outdoors – I don't love bugs or dirt, and I'm allergic to much of nature, for that matter. Yet I find the mountains a peaceful and powerful presence that never fails to calm my mind and swell my heart.

All this mountain dreaming this week has reminded me of the opening scene from the movie *The Sound of Music*. Filmed from a helicopter, it opens with this grand sweep of the greatness and wildness of the Austrian Alps. And then the camera zooms in on a modestly dressed young woman standing on top of a high meadow – so small in contrast – with the alpine peaks all around. Her arms are outstretched, her face shining with the sunlight as she spins around and around – taking in the glorious expanse of creation spread out before her. She is giddy with the joy of being alive in the midst of nature's beauty. As the music swells, you hear Julie Andrews' beautiful voice begin to sing, "The hills are alive, with the sound of music." It is a powerful scene, and we are swept away by the majesty of it all. The scene ends when the woman finishes her song and suddenly realizes that she is late and runs away from the meadow.

The next scene is in the abbey in Salzburg and the nuns are talking about this young woman, a novitiate nun named Maria, who is studying with them. Apparently, Maria is a bit too free-spirited, and her passion, enthusiasm, and imagination, as well as her lack of prudent discipline, are causes for concern among the nuns. Maria just doesn't fit the mold of a proper nun. She runs off to the mountains and is always late to chapel. She dances and sings in the abbey, and underneath her wimple, she scandalously wears curlers in her hair! She is earnest, but she doesn't follow the rules. The nun's discussion becomes a bit heated as they all wonder: How do you solve a problem like Maria? How do you fit this square peg into a round hole? What do you do with someone who doesn't fit your expectations? How do you solve a problem like Maria?

We are now more than half-way through the Gospel of Mark. Jesus has been traveling around Galilee and the surrounding gentile areas healing the sick, the lame, and the possessed. He has been preaching of the coming kingdom of God, when God will fulfill his promise of restoration and reconciliation. Jesus has been revealed by God to be his beloved Son and has demonstrated his divine authority by forgiving sins, raising from the dead, and demonstrating power over creation. To his disciples, it has become abundantly clear that he is the long-awaited and much anticipated Messiah.

But then, this is Jesus, and he obstinately refuses to fit the prescribed models of the Messiah. As everyone knew, the Messiah was to be a great leader who will come to liberate the chosen people of God and restore them to their rightful place in the world. The Messiah is expected to be a great warrior like David, or a great priest like Melchizedek, or a great prophet like Elijah.

But Jesus isn't like any of these models. He wasn't really a king, a priest, or a prophet. He was a Nobody from Nowhere. At times, his attitude toward the Law was cavalier, adhering to the spirit rather than the letter. He claimed that it wasn't what you put into your body that defiled but what come out – brushing away quite a few of the 613 Levitical laws with one sentence. Then at other times, he went even further than Moses, and claimed his own to be the higher authority. Avoiding murder wasn't good enough, you must avoid vindictive anger. You mustn't just love your neighbor, but your enemy, too. You must discipline your heart if you want in the kingdom, not merely your actions.

Rather than affecting a kingly Davidic pose, Jesus models a totally different Messianic role: that of the Suffering Servant found in the writings of the prophet Isaiah. This Messiah will be the

one who is granted full heavenly authority and exercises amazing deeds of power, and yet will be betrayed into the hands of human enemies, beaten, and crucified before all Israel. And it will be through this Messiah's submission to death, that God will triumph over death itself and resurrect his Son, and give us a taste of the promised restoration of God's creation.

It is no wonder the disciples struggle to reconcile it all. This Messiah doesn't seem to fit...he doesn't follow the rules. I imagine the disciples, like the nuns of the abbey, standing around muttering to themselves and squabbling with each other. I can hear them wondering: How do we follow a Messiah like Jesus?

How do we reconcile this crazy upside-down-ness that Jesus reveals to be the love and wisdom of God? The disciples, when faced with this paradoxical Messiah, often are puzzled and confused. Silent, even, as in our lesson today, when Jesus explains yet again that this journey to Jerusalem will end in death and resurrection. They did not understand, but this time they held their questioning and resistant tongues. Mark tells us they do so because they were afraid to ask Jesus to explain. I don't think they were so much afraid of asking the question, as they were afraid to hear the answer. How do we follow a Messiah like Jesus?

So, instead of asking Jesus to explain what he meant, and heaven forbid, hearing his answer, the disciples distract themselves with a petty argument over who was the greatest. Which one will have higher status when Jesus assumes his kingly throne? Jesus overhears their jockeying for position and decides to set them straight about how status and honor are measured in the kingdom of God. To what must have been their ultimate disappointment, Jesus says: "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all." As Jesus' paradoxical Messiahship would be defined by giving himself over to death at the hands of human enemies, the disciples would find their highest honor in sacrificial service.

This must have been shocking news for these men. This is not the role they expected to play in following Jesus. In antiquity, a servant was one who served meals, and a "servant of all" was the lowest rank of all the servants – the one who would be allowed to eat only what was left after everyone else had eaten their fill. It seems that in the upside-down kingdom of God, the path to righteousness and honor is a path of self-sacrifice and service.

Jesus then takes his point even further by taking a child in his arms and saying that welcoming one like this child might be the most important and powerful thing you can do. In antiquity, children and servants were not so dissimilar. They were both seen as ones without honor or high standing, neither enhanced one's position in the struggle for prestige or influence. And so, there was no benefit in extending hospitality to a child. But Jesus was never interested in cultural norms or societal striving for status or prestige. He says that when you welcome and honor one like this child, for no other reason than love, you welcome the Lord of all Creation. How do we follow a Messiah like Jesus?

You see, in the kingdom of God, there are no outsiders, no strangers, only friends. At the end of the last supper in John's gospel, Jesus tell his disciples, "You are my friends if you do what I command you," which is, of course, to love one another. To be Jesus' friends, we have to be each other's friends, conceivably even to lay down our lives for each other. And to practice holy friendship, we must practice love.

As God loves us with perfect love, we are called to love as well, even if imperfectly. Practicing love is means practicing welcome and holy hospitality. If the Law can, in fact, be summarized as Jesus taught us – Love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind and soul, and love your neighbor as yourself – then we live this sort of kingdom love in order to give it away to others and to bring them into our midst. In the Body of Christ, no one is a stranger because all are friends and all are worthy of our holy welcome and love.

So, how do we follow a Messiah like Jesus? What do we do with a Jesus who turns the world's wisdom on end? He says to us: If you want honor, lift up those with no status. If you want

friends, befriend those with nothing to give you. If you want abundant life, squander everything for the sake of others. If you want true freedom, submit yourself to God.

How do we live in this upside-down, inside-out kingdom? I don't really know. Like everyone else, I wander around, frequently straying from the path. I struggle with the weight and awkwardness of my cross. I don't really know how to follow a Messiah like Jesus, but I know how to start.

It always starts with love. Loving God with all my heart and mind and soul, allows me to experience being loved by God. Being God's beloved opens me to allow God to transform my hardened heart, my judgmental mind, my desolate soul. And being transformed by God allows me to love my neighbor, participating even in a small way in my neighbor's transformation. And each of us loving and being beloved allow us to participate in the reconciliation of the world and the restoration of all creation. So, I do not know how to follow a Messiah like Jesus, but I know how this following begins And I also know that I can always return to begin again each time I stumble. And, perhaps, that just might be enough.

Amen.