

“What Were You Arguing About on the Way?”

Mark 9:30-37

Dancers, singers, actors, and artists. They all want FAME.

When I was a junior in college way back in 1980, the oscar-winning movie “Fame” followed a group of students through 4 years at the New York City High School for the Performing Arts. I’m reading that on September 25th, this Friday, a new version of the film releases, starring Debbie Allen, Kelsey Grammar, and Bebe Neuwirth. For those of us who remember 1980, Debbie Allen played a dance instructor in the original movie, but now having aged almost 30 years, she is cast as the school’s principal.

The headline of the article I read is “Allen Returns to Fame.” To illustrate our gospel text, I want to read two paragraphs from that article.

“At this performing arts high school, the competitive environment is incredibly hot, and each student’s talents, passions, and determination are put to the test. In addition, the students face all the other struggles of high school - schoolwork, friendships, romances, and the rocky road of self-discovery. This film’s drama lies in its depiction of teenagers growing up as they discover whether they have the talent and discipline to become true stars.”

One of the many stirring songs from the movie includes these lyrics:

I sing the body electric, I celebrate the me yet to come.

I toast to my own reunion when I become one with the sun.

And I'll look back on Venus, I'll look back on Mars, and I'll burn with the fire of 10 million stars;

And in time, and in time, we will all be stars.

That's the dream of each of these young people: "To become one with the sun," to burn brightly in the heavens, to become a star.

Some achieve this goal, but of course, most do not. The lyrics and I'm sure the movie will suggest that you have to possess enormous talent and a burning desire to become one with the sun.

In our gospel text, Jesus encounters this same longing for glory when he's passing through the region of the Galilee with his disciples. He doesn't feel it himself, but he sees it in his followers.

Jesus is avoiding the spotlight in a way that would be unthinkable to the students of the New York City High School of Performing Arts. Instead of seeking attention, Jesus lies low, mixes in with the blue collar folk, using his undercover time to teach his disciples for a second time that, "The Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him, and three days after being killed, he will rise again." (Mark 9:31).

Understandably, the disciples don't get it. In verse 32, they don't understand what Jesus is saying and they're afraid to ask him. This talk of betrayal and death and rising again doesn't fit their idea of a good career plan.

To better understand where the disciples are coming from, it's important to

remember that this chapter of Mark begins with the Transfiguration, that glorious mountaintop experience in which Jesus is revealed to be the Son of God. Mark tells us that Jesus' clothes became "dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them." Matthew adds that "his face shone like the sun." He enters into a conversation with Elijah and Moses, the two superstars of the Old Testament.

And God's voice booms out of a cloud, "This is my Son, the Beloved, listen to him!"

Peter, James, and John are shocked, terrified, and totally impressed by this display of divine power, and if they'd been able to offer a musical tribute, they probably would have united their voices in:

I sing the body electric, I celebrate the new year to come.

I toast to my own reunion when I become one with the sun.

When Jesus and the disciples come down the mountain together, they run into an adoring crowd, one that in verse 15 is "immediately overcome with awe."

Then Jesus strongly rebukes an unclean spirit that's possessing a boy, and the spirit leaves the boy, "crying out and convulsing him terribly." The boy seems dead at first, but Jesus lifts him up and he is able to stand. Showing his demon defeating powers as the Beloved Son of God, Jesus appears to be a rising star, one who will "burn with the fire of 10 million stars." At least that's what the disciples think.

But instead, Jesus said yet again, "The Son of Man is to be betrayed, killed,

and rise again.” He predicts his fire will be snuffed out completely before it is rekindled by God.

The disciples continue to follow Jesus along the road to the town of Capernaum, and when they reach their destination, he asks them, “What were you arguing about on the way?” (REPEAT)

They are silent because they had been sparring with one another about who was the greatest. They had been singing another song from the movie Fame:

I’m gonna live forever, I’m gonna learn how to fly - High!

I feel it comin’ together, People will see me and cry - Fame!

I’m gonna make it to heaven, Light up the sky like a flame - Fame!

I’m gonna live forever, Baby, remember my name!

The disciples know there’s something deeply wrong with this approach, something out of whack, something opposed to the agenda of a Messiah who keeps quiet about his accomplishments. So they stand around at the house in Capernaum, looking at their feet in shame.

SHAME. NOT FAME.

Then Jesus sits down in his teacher’s seat, calls the 12 disciples, and says to them, “Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.” To be first you must be last, he insists, to be a star you must be a servant.

And to illustrate this counter-cultural career advise more clearly, Jesus takes a little child in his arms and says, “Whoever welcomes one such child in my name,

welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the One who sent me.”

The jaws of the disciples really hit the floor at this point, because in the first century a child is a non-person, a non-entity, a nobody. There is no reason for a little child to be close to a great teacher such as Jesus, or in the middle of a group of men. Children are to stay with the women and keep themselves out of the way until they grow up and can take on adult responsibilities.

Jesus is saying, “When you welcome a nobody, you welcome me. And when you welcome me, you welcome God. So if you want to be first in the Kingdom of God, then you’d better get use to being a child-welcoming servant of all people.”

That’s what it means to be One with the Son of God.

Jesus is calling us to flip our usual attitudes toward greatness and honor and fame completely upside down. Our normal perspective is to look at life from the top down, giving our greatest attention to the people who have competed and come out on top. We do this with singers, actors, athletes, politicians, and business leaders. We are drawn to their fame and are impressed by their talents, accomplishments, and even salaries.

But Jesus is saying, “No - change your perspective.” Instead, he says, look at life from the bottom up and give your greatest attention to the people who have no fame. Focus on children, on single moms, on dishwashers, on the working

poor, on those millions in our country with no health insurance, on the retired in this congregation and across the country, including my own mother, who can't afford their medications while in the doughnut hole, and even giving attention to the homeless.

“Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me,” says Jesus, “and whoever welcomes me welcomes God.”

Our challenge is not to “burn with the fire of 10 million stars.” Instead, it is to live and act in such a way that we are One with Son of God. And we do this whenever we treat people with dignity they deserve, as people who are made in God's image.

When I sometimes pick up my wife at the Parma Developmental Center and see the children being pushed out in their wheelchairs to the waiting vans and buses, realizing that most of them will not live beyond their twenties, I know that the people who have the patience and the skills to serve these children, are serving Jesus.

To serve the homeless people and the working poor at the Redeemer Crisis Center a meal and to give them clothing is to serve Jesus and to welcome the God who sent Jesus into the world.

Last Sunday our confirmation youth took all the children's clothing that you brought into Divinity over the last several weeks, sorted it out, and put it on many tables in the Redeemer gym. Moms and their children were lined up at the door

awaiting our confirmands and their parents to finish the sorting.

Isaiah sat next to me at the front of the line, a Latino 10 year-old who was excited about a winter pair of boots he'd spotted. He was planning ahead for the inevitable snowy winter.

A volunteer at the crises center explained in English and Spanish that 4 or 5 families would come in at a time to pick up 1 pair of shoes, 3 pairs of socks, 1 pair of pants, 2 underwear, and 3 shirts per child. As the moms came in with excited children, our confirmands stood behind the tables, re-folding and reorganizing, and helping the children find what they needed.

Our youth and parents would not have this interaction, would not know this world, if it were not for the connection of our churches being the Body of Christ. We appreciate our blessings most when we are personally present to share them with others. Talking to the children, helping them find what they need, later serving them a meal, and hearing their thank yous is what we remember and what changes us.

This bottom-up approach to greatness will never earn us fame or put us in the spotlight. But when the curtain rises on God's eternal kingdom, I know we'll be surprised by whom we see on the stage: the faithful servants of the world, people who served God and neighbor without ever drawing attention to themselves.

What were you arguing about on the way to church this morning? Will you

be arguing on the way home?

Jesus asked, “What were you arguing about on the way?”

“But they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another about who was the greatest.”

Then he took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms, he said to them, “Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the One who sent me.”

May the peace of God . . .

#431 - O Christ, What Can It mean for Us