

Proper 21 (26) 19th Sunday after Pentecost - September 29, 2024

1 Samuel 2:18–21, 26; Psalm 144:3–4, 12–15; 1 Peter 2:4–10; Mark 9:14–29

“Why couldn’t we do it?”

1. In Jesus’ times, society worked on a pretty strict and time-honored structure, with some people taking the role of Patrons and the rest the role of Clients
 - a. Scholars Bruce Malina and Richard Rohrbaugh (*Social-Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels* p. 235ff) describe how this system in Mediterranean cultures worked among people who were not in the same social class, and it was basically a society based on favors granted and favors owed
 - b. Picture a wealthy person who has a poor person come ask for a favor.
 - i. They could be looking for some food or assistance
 - ii. When the poor person receives the support, they are now bound to repay that favor to the wealthy person, whenever the wealthy person asks for it
 - iii. That poor person is now a client to the wealthy person who is now their patron
 - iv. The client becomes basically a dependent of the patron, an attachment that often was passed from generation to generation.
 1. Think about that for a moment.
 2. This wasn’t a slavery or a forced labor situation, but nevertheless one that endured to one’s children and grandchildren...
 3. The client’s family would be forever connected and loyal to the patron and their family.
 - c. In the Roman empire specifically, the patrons had these freeborn people who did work for them, like tending sheep or producing goods or tending the land
 - i. It was expected that the client would be at the patron’s house early in the morning to get any orders from the patron for what needed to be done for the day, often menial tasks.
 - ii. The client connected to the patron not only got a meal for that day and some minor favors, but also received protection by the patron
 - iii. Their dependance was quite pronounced, because these clients had no rights in the society.
 - iv. So you could see where a ruthless patron could be abusive to their clients and there would be no consequences.
 - v. So if by luck you got a generous or fair patron, you and your family would have definitely fought to benefit their patron
 - vi. It was the duty of the patron to look after those who depended on them, even beyond them - looking out for the wellbeing of the city where they lived
 - d. Incidentally, this applied to everyone, not just to the rich and poor.
 - i. The emperor was the ultimate patron, with city officials etc. being the clients to the emperor, albeit at a different level
 - ii. The emperor looked out for the wellbeing of the empire, and had loyal clients who were at the service and disposal of the emperor

- e. One other aspect of this system is that sometimes there was layer between patron and client, a role called the broker
 - i. The patrons owned the stuff
 - ii. The clients depended on the patron's generosity
 - iii. The broker managed the access that a client would have to the patron, especially when the patron was particularly wealthy or of high position
 - iv. So, for example, city officials also acted as the go-between for the city dwellers and the resources of the empire
 - v. Religious holy people were the brokers between the faithful and the deities
 - f. Which brings us then to our passage, because while we may not think of it in these terms, Jesus was functioning like the broker between the people and the power/healing/blessing that God would give
2. Desperation drove people like the boy's father in today's gospel to seek help – and in this case realign himself to another patron – but it didn't work at first
 - a. The child's ailment, which sounds like epilepsy, had been present since childhood
 - b. One can only imagine how frightening it was for the parent, and how exhausted they must have been looking for a solution
 - c. The parent came looking for Jesus, but Jesus wasn't around, so the disciples tried to help the child. But they could not heal the child
 3. The story clarifies that Jesus is working like a broker between God and the people – and us, that's probably why he's upset at the failed healing
 - a. This may not be something that we think about much, particularly because in our stories we see Jesus acting: healing, teaching, challenging
 - b. We see him as the main character, and we see all these people trying to align themselves to HIM
 - c. But if we consider their societal structure, and we if do a more careful reading of the passages overall, we will soon recognize that Jesus is always pointing to God as the main patron, the source of the power, the healing, etc.
 - d. Jesus is just coming back from the moment of transfiguration
 - i. Remember that in that story, the appearance of Jesus changes, and suddenly he's flanked by giants of the faith: Moses and Elijah
 - ii. More importantly, we hear God's voice telling the Peter, James and John: this is my beloved son. Listen to him.
 - e. At the end of the story (when Jesus is able to accomplish the healing) he tells the disciples that this kind of healing can only be done with a lot of praying and fasting.
 - i. Praying and fasting would be specific disciplines to connect one with God, and so Jesus is saying that BECAUSE he has that connection, he is able to do it.
 - ii. And it leaves open the possibility for the disciples to be able to heal a child like this, provided that they understood the needed connection to God, the patron in this scenario.
 - f. Jesus expresses some frustration in this story

- i. One way to interpret it would be to think that he's frustrated with the disciples for not having the necessary faith or connection to God they needed
 - ii. If that's the reason for his frustration, Jesus would be saying that the disciple may have lost track of who was the patron and who the client.
 - iii. In other words, if the disciples were feeling like they had the power to heal (for example) and didn't really consider that it was GOD who was doing the healing, they would have at some point reached their maximum abilities
 - g. It may well have been, I imagine, that a righteous patron utilizing the labor of clients, helping them and protecting them, may have ultimately felt that the patron's good fortune was connected to (and dependent upon) that patron's deity.
- 4. We ourselves may hesitate to ask for help even when we need it – maybe not so much because we worry about “owing back” a favor to someone, but I would argue out of a sense of 21st century independence
 - a. We want to take care of our own issues, our own circumstances
 - i. It may feel awkward or even humiliating to ask for help for something we used to do for ourselves
 - ii. And so we push ourselves, even stubbornly, and potentially it ends up not only not working but going against us
 - b. Yet, when we are the ones who offer the help, we might be puzzled why people don't take us up on it
 - i. We offer out of the goodness of our heart – not so they'd owe us!
 - ii. We're just being good neighbors!
 - c. Today's healing story may help us to think of a kind of interdependence on one another as together we seek the healing power from God
 - i. In that sense then we are each other's intermediaries and we lean imperfectly on each other as we support each other and we seek God's power to lift us
 - ii. Key in that model is for us not to think of ourselves as the patrons
 - iii. In other words, we do ministry (support, feed, advocate for people, etc.) but we do it not because of ourselves but on behalf of God.
 - iv. That argues for a kind of open and gracious hospitality because we ourselves are graciously blessed by God
 - v. Think of it as a kind of paying it forward.
 - d. And it is a process that happens in community, ultimately trying to blur the lines which could place us at different levels
 - i. The community comes together, and all gifts are from God, and all are used
 - ii. If we help this person today, that person could be helping us tomorrow
 - iii. All this while we are all in that same crucial moment which the parent in the story finds themselves in: I believe help my unbelief!
 - iv. We do that together, believing when others are doubting, and leaning on their belief when we find our faith lagging.

Jesus nurtures in us a healthy sense of interdependence, when we lean on each other as together we turn to God for guidance, sustenance, love and grace.