

**Sunday, September 22, 2024**  
The Eighteenth Sunday After Pentecost

**Festal Eucharist**  
11:00 am

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A Sermon by  
The Rev. Mark Schultz

*on*

Jeremiah 11:18-20; Psalm 54; James 3:13-4:3, 7-8a; Mark 9:30-37

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## **The Center of the Circle**

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

When I was in high school, some friends of mine and I decided that  
What our school really needed  
Was a secret society.  
So of course we formed one. We called ourselves “The Autumn Circle”  
Mostly because the majority of us were into goth music  
And we thought calling ourselves  
The Autumn Circle  
Sounded sort of goth.  
Goth for us meant loving Keats and Shelley as well as the sorts of musical groups that  
Produced albums named things like  
“Your Funeral, My Trial” “The Sky’s Gone Out” and “Within the Realm of a Dying Sun”  
Adolescence, you may remember, is a very intense time.  
So we were the Autumn Circle  
We met very infrequently, officially, that is  
But when we did, we would usually be planning some  
Hopefully subversive art happening at the school.  
Like planning our entry into the school talent show and competition.  
That was the very zenith of our creative output.  
We performed a skit we wrote together that was heavily influenced by Dadaist absurdism  
Not because we thought we would win on the merits of Dadaist absurdism  
But because we’d never seen a high school talent show that featured Dadaist absurdism. So.  
The real high point of the skit featured one of our number  
Standing at the edge of the stage, crying out to the audience  
Over and over and over again  
What are you doing here, go home!

What are you doing here, go home!  
 While industrial noise music played incredibly loudly over the school auditorium speakers  
 Oh it was glorious.  
 The looks of confusion on everybody's faces  
 People had no idea what was going on. None.  
 And neither did we. Really. But.  
 We were the Autumn Circle:  
 What people did or didn't understand had nothing to do with what we were.  
 They weren't part of the Circle. They weren't in on the joke.  
 What are you doing here. Go home.

Now we started the Circle, of course, really, because  
 We'd all found ourselves at the edges of so many other circles:  
 We just wanted an explicit place of belonging  
 And there's nothing wrong with belonging, of course,  
 We need places of belonging:  
 Communities, friendships, relationships, families whether biological or found,  
 In which and through which we can share ourselves  
 Give ourselves to each other  
 So we made our own circle, dedicated to our own values, our own aesthetic sensibilities  
 Self-consciously having nothing whatsoever to do with any other circle  
 Dedicated, in fact, to the rejection of every other circle of which we were not truly a part  
 Literally, in the case of that talent show  
 Performing that rejection as a sign of our own social identity.  
 Of course, in many ways,  
 That's precisely what made our circle exactly like every other circle:  
 We joined the chorus of everyone shouting at someone:  
 "You're not welcome. We don't want you. What are you doing here. Go home."

That's often the thing about social circles, though—in-groups:  
 They're gathered around the rejection of something, usually someone who represents that something.  
 In his book "The Gospel and the Sacred," theologian Robert Hamerton-Kelly  
 Recalls to us the prototypical human social circle when he helpfully reminds us that  
 "The place at the center of the circle is the place of the victim during a stoning."  
 "The place at the center of the circle is the place of the victim during a stoning."  
 Violence in one form or another is often found at the heart of the social  
 And this insidious violence by which we're formed as social beings, political beings, economic beings,  
 In which we regularly and often unknowingly participate  
 Is, let's name it: satanic. It is sin. And it, unfortunately, makes us who we are  
 Even before we know who we really are to begin with.  
 (There's a startling alternative, though. We'll get there in a minute.)  
 To paraphrase our epistle: we're unable to ask for and subsequently receive  
 Who and what we are from someone who actually loves us  
 Because we're conditioned from birth to prefer taking who we are at another's expense.  
 Jesus is dealing with precisely this on our Gospel this morning.  
 And a little background is helpful here.

This is the second time in Mark's Gospel  
 That Jesus has talked to the disciples about his death and resurrection  
 And it's clear they have no idea what he's talking about.  
 It's clear, too, that they don't even have the right conceptual framework from which to ask him about it

The last time anyone came close to asking was the first time Jesus talked about such things  
 When Peter told Jesus he was wrong to mention ever dying  
 Which prompted Jesus to call Peter Satan or Adversary for being opposed to the plan of God.  
 It's likely that episode is still fresh in the apostles' minds,  
 And they don't want to repeat it:

No one wants Jesus to call them Satan.

But while they don't want to repeat it, they didn't really learn anything from it  
 Which means: they're definitely going to repeat it.

Case in point: our reading today.

The reason why Peter was so disturbed by Jesus' proclamation of his death  
 Has to do with the sort of Messiah that Peter thought Jesus was:

The warrior king who would destroy the corrupt Herods of this world,  
 The false client kings of the Roman Empire,  
 Throw off the oppressor's yoke

Exterminate or expel all the gentiles

And reign victorious over a freed and restored nation.

Jesus' understanding of what it means to be Messiah, though, is markedly different:

His mission is not to end violent oppression through oppressive violence

But to end the reign of sin and death that feeds oppression, that roots every Empire

And he would rather suffer violence to end it, exhausting it in the infinite depths of his love  
 Vanquishing it by the light of the Resurrection.

He will not reproduce or reinscribe the old patterns of violence, sin and death to which we're victim  
 And then call it salvation

He will not bless those patterns, he will not sanction them, he will break them.

He will put himself at the center of the stoning circle,

Will replace every victim at the center of every social circle

With his own cross, his own thorn-crowned, pierced and nail-torn body,

He will undo death from the inside of death

And re-center every life on his own living, open and love-wounded heart,

Transforming every community into a community of welcome

So we can finally desire and receive who and what we truly are from the hands of the One

Who longs to freely give us his own divine life.

Meanwhile, expecting a worldly powerful death-dealing Messiah,

The disciples are arguing with each other about who gets to be

Prime minister or chamberlain or privy counsellor or otherwise all around great

In this shiny new worldly, powerful, death-dealing Messiah's kingdom

That ultimately looks like every other deal-dealing kingdom in the world, except it's theirs;

And, unsurprisingly, tempers are flaring and people aren't talking any more, they're bickering.

But then look what Jesus does:

Jesus turns the tables and offers a new vision of power and of community.

“He took a little child and set him in the midst of them”  
 In the middle.  
 He put a child, a little child, in the center of the group.  
 To us, of course, it’s precisely the sort of thing Jesus would do  
 We know Jesus loves the little children  
 We’ve sung the song probably many times throughout the course of our lives  
 It’s sort of a no brainer in a way  
 If Jesus sees a child, he’s probably gonna take them and put them in the center of things;  
 But imagine what the disciples are thinking.  
 Because in their world, in their social reality  
 A child is nothing.  
 A child has no social standing  
 A child has no power, no greatness  
 A child relies on another person who loves them for everything they need  
 A child can’t do anything for you  
 A child won’t get you the prime minister position  
 A child is nothing.  
 And here’s Jesus, after everyone’s been arguing about who’s greatest, most powerful,  
 Here’s Jesus putting a child in the middle of their social circle  
 As if it ought to be one of them  
 As if it could ever hope to compete with them:  
 How dare he.  
 Can you imagine the bewildered, barely veiled animosity  
 Radiating from the disciples who now have a discreet focus of rage  
 In this child at the center of their stoning circle? It’s actually an incredibly dangerous moment.

But before any of them can think or do so say anything more.  
 Jesus folds that child in his arms. Embraces him. Joins her in the center.  
 And seems to say, “Do you see what I’ve done here?  
 Do you see what’s become of the center of this circle?  
 Look how it’s now a space of welcome.  
 See how I welcome those who are powerless in your eyes.  
 See how the no-one is welcome and at home in my embrace at the center of all things.  
 See how I stand with, next to and in the place of  
 Anyone and everyone you think is nothing.  
 See how my love can transform the center of your lives.”  
 No longer “What are you doing here, go home.”  
 But “I’m glad I found you here, welcome home.”

It is a wondrous strange and glorious mystery of the Kingdom  
 That when we see Jesus, the Glorious and Sovereign Lord of the World  
 We’re invited to see the powerless  
 We’re invited to see the outcast  
 The unhoused, the food insecure, the refugee, the immigrant,  
 And in fact anyone who could be written off, ignored or rejected  
 We’re invited to see them all  
 Enthroned in the embrace of the King of Heaven who reigns from the Tree

At the place in our lives that the love of God by the sign of the cross  
Has transformed into the place of welcome  
Of Belovedness;  
And to know that we, all of us, all people,  
In our own real and innate powerlessness  
In our human frailty and weakness, in our abject and naked contingency,  
The enduring reality of which reveals all merely human power as empty posturing  
In our inability to free ourselves from the bondage of sin  
In our complete incapacity to add anything of any value to God's own life  
We, all of us, all people  
Have somehow, by some inexplicable, unlooked-for grace,  
Through Christ's Incarnation, Passion, Death, Resurrection and Ascension  
Through the One who became nothing for our sake because we were everything to him:  
We have all been placed at the center of God's own Love, God's own Life  
And given the opportunity to receive, through faith, our own identities as Beloved,  
Belonging to God.

What would it mean to live this sort of new life of welcome?  
What would it mean to become nothing to the world of death and sin and violence  
So that God could be everything to us and in us?  
What would it mean to discover the cross at the center of all of our social circles?  
And to realize that we're invited to call home a new sort of circle  
Whose welcoming center, as the mystics say, is everywhere, and whose circumference is nowhere?  
Maybe we'd find ourselves saying more often to friend and stranger alike:  
I love you. I'm glad you're here. And hey, would you look at that: we're home.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

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