

REALITY SHOWS!

A Sermon for the Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost (Year B), September 20, 2009

Text: Mark 9:30-37 and James 3:13—4:3; 4:7–8a

So, what is “reality,” anyway?

I’ve seen episodes and trailers of various “reality shows.” I don’t care for them all that much. Being a pastor, I’m naturally drawn to the one with the religious theme. Hell’s Kitchen. But you can’t avoid these shows any more. In one form or another, they seem to constitute the bulk of television programming. Survivor, American Idol, Amazing Race, Big Brother, Cops, and so on.

I think it says something about us, that we call these *reality* shows. “The Bachelor” is reality?

I suppose the basic reason we call them “reality shows” is that the people are not wearing costumes and playing a role, following a script, as in a drama. People are who they are, they use their real names, in “reality” shows. You are not watching how someone imagines things *might* go—you’re actually watching real things happen, even if the setup is artificial.

Judging from many of the shows, they might also be called “reality shows” because the participants “let their hair down.” The shows seem to thrive on catching people expressing their inmost, private thoughts and feelings. As if people show who they *really* are in those moments when they are striving fiercely against others. Or when they don’t know the camera is on them. When their defenses break down, and they just let it all hang out.

I suppose that is reality, too.

Sort of like Jesus’ disciples, in today’s Gospel reading. You would never know that six verses before this they had all been publicly humiliated over their failure to heal a boy who had a demon. Jesus had to do it himself.

Next thing you know, they are arguing over who is the greatest. Shameless. Disciples of the great teacher and miracle-worker, the one who talked about God’s reign and loving one another, and they are arguing about who is the greatest? Well, I suppose that’s **reality** for you.

I think we tend to use the word “reality” in a negative way. The disciples *looked* good, but “in reality” they were just as self-centered as everyone else. We wouldn’t say it the other way around—that these fellows quarreled when Jesus wasn’t looking, but *in reality* they were good disciples.

We also talk about being “hijacked” by reality—and we mean that our plans got spoiled. When something wonderful happens, we might say we were lucky or that God helped us, but we don’t say “reality came to our aid,” or “reality reared its beautiful head.”

Our lessons today are full of the sort of “reality” we complain about.

Jeremiah grumbles . . . “I was like a gentle lamb led to the slaughter.” I didn’t even realize that it was against me they were devising schemes—to cut me off from the land of the living, so that my name would no longer be remembered.” That was his harsh reality.

The psalmist grieves to God that “strangers have risen up against me,” and “the ruthless have sought my life.” People have even been spying on him! More harsh reality.

James writes a gloomy little essay on the topic. He tells us that if we have “bitter envy and selfish ambition” in our hearts, there is bound to be “disorder and wickedness of every kind.” Conflicts and disputes among us—don’t we experience these?—come from cravings that are at war within us. Murder, conflicts, disputes—they all come from a common source, inside ourselves. We have only ourselves to blame, if that’s the world we are experiencing, according to James.

You gotta be realistic. As Jesus was, that time he was visiting Jerusalem and “*many believed in his name because they saw the signs that he was doing. But Jesus on his part would not entrust himself to them, because he knew all people and needed no one to testify about anyone; for he himself knew what was in everyone.*” That’s why he didn’t entrust himself to them! And you know, he was right, wasn’t he? Look what happened to him when he stopped being careful!

So Jesus was realistic. Realistic enough to know that he would be betrayed into human hands, and, realistically, they would probably kill him.

But Jesus did not accept the twisted reality around him. He began untwisting it. Untwisting reality, into a new reality.

The reality was, they would kill him. The new reality began with this: he would rise again.

And that reality was not just something that would apply to him. He applies it to us. He includes us in that new reality. He illustrates that reality by an interesting equation at the end of this Gospel.

It sounds unrealistic, to say the very least, to say that “whoever welcomes a little child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.” Unrealistic, because Jesus says there that the honor and glory of God, the “being the greatest one” of God, who is the greatest one, attaches to the person he sends—namely Jesus. And the honor and glory of God, the “being the greatest one” of God, attaches to the little one he sets in their midst.

Jesus is correcting his disciples, not so much for arguing, as for getting it all wrong. They were still subscribing to what James calls a wisdom that is “earthly, unspiritual, devilish.” According to that philosophy, you have to fight for everything that matters to you. Jesus tells his disciples to cancel that subscription and start making use of the wisdom from above, which is “first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy.”

The strength to do so, the strength to be good, does not come from greater efforts but from knowing the truth—that “whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.”

I like how the apostle Paul talks about that in Romans 12: “Outdo one another [!] in *showing honor.*” Cute! That encapsulates the wisdom from above, the wisdom that has its origins in God’s love.

It sounds upside down from a reality in which, the more important you are, the bigger welcome you get. I saw Larry Bird arrive in a helicopter once in Terre Haute—he got a very big welcome. A sort of “Jesus returns to Capernaum with his disciples” welcome. That’s the way it is. I used to live in Terre Haute, but when I return to Terre Haute for a visit, I hit all the red lights.

James begs us to live according to the wisdom from above. “Let the reality show!” he says, “Show by your good life that your works are done with gentleness born of wisdom.”

But Jesus doesn’t just plead with us to be more wise. He creates the new reality, when he is betrayed into human hands—that’s us—and is killed, and rises again. He makes us great, and holy, and special, by thus being our servant. He lifts us up, when he washes our feet. He does everything he recommends, in order that we might be children of God. **That is reality, too**—that Jesus Christ draws our bath for us. Jesus is the waiter at our table. How does that make you feel?

And the letter of James simply asks us to let that reality show.

Let the *reality* of God’s forgiving you *show* by your forgiving others.

Let the *reality* of God’s accepting you *show* in your accepting of others.

Let the *reality* of God’s blessing you *show* by your being a blessing to others.

Let the *reality* of God’s consoling you *show* as you console others.

Let the *reality* of God’s generosity towards you *show* in your generosity to others.

Let the *reality* of God’s serving you *show* in your service of others.

Let the *reality* of God’s love *show* in your love.

This is “Extreme Makeover: Wisdom Edition”: God anoints an Apprentice who becomes Big Brother to this whole Amazing Race, so that we might avoid being “voted off the island,” and instead of being Big Losers or even mere Survivors, we could Dance with the Stars. I mean, Who *Wants* to Be a Millionaire, when you can be a “little child” of God?

So Jesus says “Move that bus,” and there it stands: **You**. Really and truly, God’s child. Let **that** reality show. Amen.