

Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost
September 20, 2009

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Our Canon Theologian, New Testament Scholar, Marcus Borg has written that in the cultural climate in which we live, the three A's abound; the ways of achievement, affluence and appearance. In the light of today's Gospel, I'd like to explore two of these "A" words, Achievement and Appearance. Within the trinity of passion predictions which Jesus makes in the central section of Mark's Gospel that we're reading these weeks, three times Jesus predicts that he will be betrayed, will suffer and die and will be raised up. The first prediction we heard last week. Jesus is asked who people are saying that he is and Peter responds "You're the Christ", Christ being the anointed one, the Messiah and Jesus tells what it means to be the Christ, suffering, dying and being raised to life. Well Peter cannot abide that form of Messiahship. For Peter, Jesus must be the great achiever. For Peter, being the Messiah *is* achievement, plus how would it appear if God sent a Messiah to his people and this figure suffered the death of a traitor. Someone killed on a cross as a political traitor is no great achiever and certainly doesn't appear as a god. And how does Jesus respond to Peter's denial? "Get behind me Satan" You're caught up, Peter, in your need for achievement and appearance. The demons "achievement and appearance" have entered you Peter. And then in today's Gospel reading we have the second of Mark's three passion predictions. Just as in last week's reading we hear Jesus' predict betrayal. The Son of Man will be delivered into the hands of men. He predicts death and they will kill him and he predicts resurrection and after three days he will rise. And this time his disciples fall into the temptation of needing to be achievers. They argue among themselves about importance. They have regressed to about the level of an eight year old – "I'm more important, I have a new Blackberry; no, I'm more important I've got more gadgets than you do". Jesus must have shaken his head fondly and sadly before he snatched this teachable moment as he always did. And once again he explains that to be really important in the realm of God they must be servants; the Greek word here is actually "slaves" – slaves – that implies submission; it implies lack of ego; it implies the opposite of achievement, in fact it implies "non-appearance". Slaves were invisible beings in Jesus' time, being "great" would be beyond the realm of possibility for a slave, a non-person in Jesus' time. Have you ever experienced the "non-being" of a servant yourself? For instance when you were young were you a golf caddy and the men whose clubs you carried talked as if you weren't even there? The concept of servants being non-people; it's dramatically evident in one of my all-time favorite films "Gosford Park" – remember that upstairs, downstairs mystery? Well in one scene a married man and woman, married to other people, that is, are having an affair and they are fervently declaring their love for each other on the elegant stairway at the country mansion where they're spending the weekend. In the midst of their tryst, one of the servants walks by down the stairs and the woman says "Oh, we must be careful" and the man looks over his shoulder where she has glanced, sees *what* she sees, not *who* she sees, the servant coming down the stairs about to pass them and he comments, "oh, *that's* no problem – not even *he's* no problem – *that's* no problem. It was understood by the affluence, important, beautiful

people who were the weekend house guests that the servants of course saw all, heard all, but what they thought counted for nothing, for they were merely the “help”; they were nobodies. Talk about appearances! If anyone would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all Jesus tells his disciples. And then, right away, Jesus reaches for a child, another nobody in Jesus’ time and Jesus embraces that child – unheard of – and comments to his listeners “whoever receives a child in my name receives me”. A *child*, a non-person in the time of Jesus is as important in God’s realm as all people of appearance, of achievement, of affluence. In the realm of God about which Jesus is teaching everywhere and to everyone, in God’s realm, non-persons are loved. In God’s realm non-persons are somebodies: children, lepers, slaves, all who are marginalized are loved unconditionally; unconditionally, totally, infinitely by God. It’s an astounding concept and it’s a concept Jesus’ followers miss entirely, that’s why they’re caught up in their own importance, are caught arguing about it. Appearance, achievement -- Jesus’ dear friends have been arguing about who among them could be counted as the greatest. What do you suppose they mean by the greatest? The one appearing most important? Appearance – it can be so fickle. Con men take in gullible people totally by appearing to be affluent, or smart or honest or responsible or all of the above plus *nice*. When have you been deceived by someone’s whose appearance was a sham? When I was seventeen I was completely taken in by a charming, well-dressed, friendly woman who called from the bus stop in our village asking for help from my father, a priest. She said the rest of her journey would be the next day and she was looking for a place to stay. Well, my father and my mother were away on vacation and wanting to be a helpful and loving person, I invited Mrs. Bloget, which is what she said her name was, to spend the night in the rectory. Mrs. Bloget spent a couple of nights in the rectory. I couldn’t figure out how to invite her to move on and when at last she did with enough money from me to take the bus to her daughter’s town, that’s where she said she was going. I said good bye, feeling righteous and helpful. I went off to work that morning. Late that afternoon after work long after she was to have left town, I saw her in the 5 & 10 cent store buying things with her bus money. Well, I wised up quickly and I called the police and in her locker at the bus station they found a few household items, some letterhead paper from the Diocese of New York Episcopal Church Women, for which my mother was recording secretary and eventually we thought this was funny, some of my mother’s underwear. We were lucky she didn’t help herself to the family silver. I’ll never know why. I guess it was about time for me to learn that appearance can be highly deceiving. And the disciples, how they wanted to be seen as having achieved something. After those several years of wandering the roads of Palestine listening to this remarkable man whom people flocked to hear who they knew was important. They sought importance too. Achievement, appearance – they can be so empty. In the next chapter of Mark after Jesus’ third passion prediction, the last of his trinity of predicting the trial, death and resurrection, two of his disciples, James and John come up to him and furtively ask him if he’ll seat them at his left and his right when they all come into their glory, when they’re all in heaven together. Talk about seeking achievement and appearance! Well Jesus responds it’s not for him to grant. We’ll hear this story in a few weeks. The other disciples hear the discussion and they’re incensed at James and John. Now I suspect they’re not so incensed at their friends’ temerity at asking for priority seating as they are that they didn’t think of it first and once again Jesus seizes the teachable moment and preaches that in the

kingdom the one who would be first must be slave of all. It's not about achievement and appearance, it's about humility, poverty of spirit, accepting being a nobody. In James letter, which is basically a morality letter, giving clear instructions about how Christians should behave. We heard this morning him suggesting that those in the group he's instructing, if they are wise, will "by a good life show good works only in the meekness of wisdom". I love that – "in the meekness of wisdom". A life lived not in bitter jealousy and selfish ambition, but in the meekness of wisdom. James' words for "over-achievement", bitter jealousy, selfish ambition, will be a life of wisdom. Last week Dean Lupfer talked of Lady Wisdom, the feminine form of God which exhibits wise Godliness. The Wisdom of God has no use for achievement, for appearance. The Wisdom of God challenges us to live like "nobodies". The Wisdom of God invites us to honesty, to humility, to unconditional love. You remember Emily Dickinson's poem: "I'm nobody, who are you?"

I'm nobody, who are you? Are you nobody too?"
Then there's a pair of us
Don't tell, they'll banish us you know
How dreary to be somebody
How public like a frog
To tell your name the live long day
To an admiring bog

So clever, how dreary, she's writing, to have to live up to being somebody. How tiresome, how exhausting to have to broadcast yourself over and over as the greatest. I'm somebody, the frog could say: "I'm the greatest, I'm important, see what I've achieved. Look at me! Just look at me."

Now wouldn't it be dreary to have to say that all the time over and over?

Were we to stand in a void all alone and were we to try to broadcast ourselves like that, what would Jesus do if he heard us being infantile like that? He would love us. He'd take us into his arms and he'd bless us, wouldn't he? He'd understand.

"I'm nobody. Are you nobody too?"