

The Seventeenth Sunday After Pentecost – 2021

Jeremiah 11:18-20

James 3:13—4:10

Mark 9:30-37

Lewis Carroll had a tremendous imagination. I am glad that I am not Alice. It is a chaotic place, Wonderland. A seven-year-old girl follows a white rabbit in a waistcoat holding a pocket watch. Alice tumbles down a hole and finds herself in a mysterious hall with multiple doors – all locked. She finds a little key to a door too small for her to fit through, but through it, through the keyhole, she sees an attractive garden. Alice then discovers a bottle on a table labelled "DRINK ME," the contents of which cause her to shrink. Now she can fit through the door but she's too small to reach the key which she had left on the table. She subsequently eats a cake labelled "EAT ME" in currants. After she eats the cake, she grows to a mammoth size, is completely beside herself and cries a river. Alice has undergone so much change in so little time that she doesn't know who she is anymore. **"Who in the world am I? Ah, that's the great puzzle!"**

Wonderland is an alternate reality. Alternate reality... there is no such thing. There are an awful lot of people who want to create reality; only One has. "And God said, 'Let there be light,' and there was light" (Genesis 1:3). God Himself is reality and He creates. What is real flows from Him. Reality is that the sun rises in the east. Reality is that God the Father sent His only-begotten Son into our flesh: Conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary. Reality is that you are a redeemed child of God, purchased by the sacrifice of His Son and made holy by being washed in His blood when you were baptized. Do you lose track of reality? Yes. Do you lose track of who you are? Yes.

There are forces at work that want to take you captive; captive to an alternate reality. Ultimately, Satan is behind this subterfuge. He wants people to abandon reality, abandon God, abandon love and hope and grace and truth and forgiveness and humility. Those things are REAL. God and love and hope and grace and truth and forgiveness and humility tell you who you are. There is an enormous amount of political foolishness going on now because some folks want to assert an alternate reality – say it loud enough, say it long enough and more and more people will abandon reality and embrace what is empty, what is demonic, what is false. We are vulnerable to deceit. Our fallen flesh is easily duped and we become willing residents of Wonderland. Soon we ask Alice's question: **"Who in the world am I? Ah, that's the great puzzle!"** It's not a particularly pleasant feeling, not knowing who you are. How many people have cried a river because they forgot or had no clue who they were?

Jesus was teaching His disciples about reality. Jesus was teaching His disciples about Himself. The Lord Christ is reality of the Highest order. Jesus' suffering is reality. Jesus' holy cross is reality. Jesus' victory over death and the grave is reality. St. Mark conveys the result of this teaching without embellishment. About the disciples, St. Mark wrote this: "But they did not understand the saying, and were afraid to ask" (Mark 9:32). Why? Why could they not get this? Previously, Peter had ripped Jesus when the Lord told them that He was going to be killed, and rise again. Did the disciples not have a taste for reality? Did they want to create their own? Jesus diagnoses the whole thing. Jesus exposes the disciples' affinity for an alternate reality. He does it in a gentle, pastoral way but also in a way that they could not escape.

Nonchalantly, casually, Jesus asks His disciples a simple question: “What were you discussing along the way?” (Mark 9:33). Now, how many of y’all believe that Jesus asks questions in order to gain some elusive information? No? The twelve said not a word. That tells you something. They could’ve pled the 5th Amendment, assuming they were all Americans, as we typically do. Abraham Lincoln was an American. He said this: “Better to remain silent and be thought a fool than to speak and to remove all doubt.” What were the disciples discussing along the way? “They were arguing with one another about who was the greatest” (Mark 9:34). That kind of talk, the mind that engages in that kind of talk – it defies reality because it defies Christ, His life, His humility, His person. Pride is an alternate reality, Satan’s reality. Killing the unborn is Satan’s reality. Adultery, drunkenness, cruelty, greed – that is an alternate reality, vacuous and empty and hellish. Spending time in the dark “wonderland” of evil will bring an identity crisis: **“Who in the world am I?”**

Jesus knew who He was. “You are from below; I am from above. You are of this world; I am not of this world” (John 8:23). Jesus knew who He was. “I am the way, and the truth, and the life” (John 14:6). Jesus knew who He was. “I am the resurrection and the life” (John 11:25). “I am the light of the world” (John 8:12). “I am the Good Shepherd” (John 10:11). “I am the bread of life” (John 6:35). Jesus knew who He was. Jesus knows who He is. He calls us into His life. He calls us into reality as God has created it. Good Friday is reality. God atoned for your sin as the Lord Christ hung suspended between earth and heaven, pierced. Love poured out all that Love is as Jesus unleashed His blood, His forgiveness. That day is all around you. That day is reality morning, noon and night. Reality holds you close – when you feel it and when you don’t. Good Friday can never be undone. Good Friday can never be diminished. Easter can never be diminished. God rose from the dead in the person of Jesus Christ. That truth endures. That truth is unassailable. Easter is in every part of this world – alive and vibrant.

Jesus taught His disciples about Himself by putting a child in their midst. Children were powerless in the ancient world. Childhood in antiquity was a time of terror. Vulnerable to disease, possessing a status on par with a slave, children were antithetical to honor, escaping almost everyone’s notice, easily forgotten. Jesus identifies with that lowliness and that lack of personal standing. That’s who Jesus’ eyes are on – the forgotten, the marginalized, the vulnerable and the despised. To reflect reality, to reflect the life of the One we call Christ the King, we have our eyes on them as well. To serve them. To bless them. To encourage and strengthen and embrace them. Reality is around us every day. To act coherently toward reality – do you know what we call that? We call that wisdom. It is unwise to ignore reality. Haven’t we ignored it long enough. How long will we inhabit Satan’s “wonderland” and go through a perpetual identity crisis because we refuse to shake this fallen world’s alternate reality?

We are here, together, in this sacred space, because Jesus has drawn us. The episode in the Gospel reading has been expanding ever since it took place. Time and space and persons – that episode is expanding. The lesson does not change. The person unveiling reality doesn’t change. Who He engages does. We are His contemporary audience. We have discussed foolish things on the way. Pride has gone from our heart to our mouth. Jesus, in this place, returns us to what is good and enduring and true. In this place, He returns us to Himself. In this place, He returns us to reality.

You are a forgiven child of the Most High. That is reality. You bear His life in your soul. That is reality. You have been purchased from sin and death and heaven is your home. That is reality. Christ has prepared a place for you at His altar and He has prepared a place for you in His Father's house. That is reality. Jesus knew who He was. He knew that His Father was in charge. From eternity, the plan of salvation had been crafted and now it was to be unleashed. Jesus told His disciples then. Jesus tells you now. Your heavenly Father delivered His Son into the hands of men and that Son, that Savior, was crucified. Reality is sweet. Sin is abolished in His death. Life comes cascading out of the tomb. Because of Christ, because of the Gospel, we know who we are. Who are we? We are cherished children of God, forgiven, loved and blessed.