

FOURTH-PERSON GRAMMAR
Sermon for Pentecost 21B- Mk 10:35-45
LPC, 10/18/15

I'm going to take us back to what may be a painful subject for some of you: middle school grammar. As you may recall, if you have not blocked it from memory, verbs are conjugated to conform to the subject of the sentence or clause: whether the subject is singular or plural, or first-, second- or third- person.

First-person singular is when the subject is oneself: I, me, my, mine. First-person plural is when the subject is oneself with at least one other person: we, us, our, ours. Second-person is for a person or persons being addressed: you, your, yours. In English we no longer differentiate between singular and plural second-person, but we used to, back in the days of thou, thee and thine. Third-person refers to a person or persons being talked *about* rather than *to*: he, him, his, she, her, hers, they, them, theirs.

There is good reason for pronouns to be ordered this way: first-, second- and third- persons. Psychologists tell us that this is how children develop awareness. First, they become aware of themselves. Secondly they become aware of other people as those persons relate to themselves. Third and finally children become aware of people as persons separate from themselves. This process is necessary for healthy maturation and socialization.

Jesus does grammar, and psychology, one better, bringing the whole matter full circle Jesus asks that people not only recognize people separate from themselves, but love and regard people apart from themselves *as* themselves. You might call this fourth-person grammar. Or, if you prefer a sports metaphor, what Jesus teaches is like reaching home plate again after passing first, second and third bases, ending up right back where you started, but having accomplished something wonderful for the team.

Now, many of us humans don't reach the level of fourth-person grammar, of regarding others as we do ourselves. Some of us do when we are at our best, but most of us find it difficult to remain at the level of fourth-person grammar for long, and slip back into earlier stages of both grammar and psychology, where "them" becomes a word of exclusion, "you" becomes a word of accusation, and "we" becomes a word of insularity.

At our worst we revert to and get stuck back in the first-person singular: I, me, mine. I had a little cousin who at the age of two was so fond of the word "me" that her mother joked about registering her for preschool under the name "Me Byers." An emphasis on "me" is endearing (to a point) in a young child, but is inappropriate for an adult, and far, far, short of the adulthood to which we are called by Jesus.

Getting stuck in the first person-singular is not only immature, *and* annoying to other people, *and* counter to the teaching of Jesus, it is also profoundly dangerous, even fatal. I am convinced that people who commit atrocities like school shootings have gotten stuck in the first-person singular. They are stuck in their own brains. They don't bring what's inside their heads into the light of day to be judged according to the pool of human experience and common wisdom. They consider the extent of their own thoughts to be the universe, and can't conceive

of an external, objective reality. God help us if they do share their first-person singular thoughts with only one other person who is similarly limited in outlook. This appears to be what happened at Columbine, or at the Boston Marathon.

Lest we think that only crazy people get stuck in the world of first-person singular, let me give some more common examples of first-person singular fixation: Those tapes of self-loathing and self-destructiveness that some of us replay in our heads. Or conversely, those tapes of self-righteousness and self-justification, where we convince ourselves that we're just standing up for our own interests, or those of a group we happen to belong to.

I find the seduction of first-person singular grammar even in my prayer life, where I sit down to be open to God and find my mind crowded with *my* thoughts: what *I'm* going to do next, or what's on *my* to-do list, or how *I* should have handled a certain situation, or how worried *I* am about something. I find that in order to have a truly healing prayer session, I have to *get out of my own head*.

This sense of being distracted by one's own interests is a common experience of spiritual seekers. Buddhists call it "monkey mind." Christian saints know it well, and their writings contain lots of suggestions for dealing with the tendency of the human mind to hijack the commendable intent to turn to God. Often, during a twenty-minute prayer session, attention to God must be intentionally redirected hundreds of times, even by those experienced in contemplative prayer.

I could share some of these saintly suggestions for redirected prayer with you today, but that's not the subject of this sermon. . If you're interested in prayer technique, be sure to join the Friends of St. Lawrence, which will be launched next month. For now, I return to what is the subject of this sermon, which is that to be a follower of Jesus, you have to get out of your own head. You have to get over yourself. You have to consider that the measure of reality is not your own mind, but the mind of God. This is the essence of Christian humility, and it's what Jesus, in the Gospel of Mark, has been yammering on about for chapters and chapters.

This is what Jesus is talking about when he says the first must be last. The first-person mindset takes a subordinate place to the fourth-person mindset, where the other is considered to be on a par with oneself. Or, as Jesus tells ambitious James and foresighted John in today's Gospel reading from Mark: whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all.

The life-as-usual convention of self-promotion has no place in the kingdom of God. In the kingdom of God, greatness comes from serving one another. Success is the ability to regard the other person as oneself: where the third person and the first person are irrelevant because they are irrevocably joined. The kingdom of God is a "place" of fourth-person grammar, where my interests are your interests are their interests are our interests.

Just as thinking beyond three dimension is difficult for those of us who live in three dimensions, thinking beyond third-person grammar is difficult for us whose language embraces only three persons. But reality is bigger than what we humans conceive. God is bigger than we know. And God calls us to the ineffable grammar in which God, Godself, lives.