Awkward Silences

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

If you should like a title for this sermon, I call it “Awkward Silences.” There are two of them in this morning’s Gospel Lesson. We will look at them soon, but before we do, let me share my theme with you without delay. It goes this way: If you should encounter an awkward silence in your life, be brave, and forge ahead into that silence with the goal of uncovering the truth. Never fear to draw closer to the truth, for in doing so you are also drawing closer to Jesus. More about this theme later. For now let us look at the two awkward silences we find in this morning’s Gospel Lesson.

The first one follows our Lord’s passion prediction in St. Mark Chapter 9. Three times in St. Mark’s Gospel Jesus speaks of his coming passion — his suffering and death. He is trying to prepare the twelve disciples for what lies ahead. He forewarns them that in many respects his story is not going to turn out well. He is going to die, before long, as a young man. His words in this morning’s Gospel Lesson go this way:

“The Son of man will be delivered into the hands of men, and they will kill him; and when he is killed, after three days he will rise.”

The concluding part of this passion prediction is wonderful! It is what we call the “gospel.” It is the good news of the resurrection. Jesus is telling his disciples in advance that he will rise from the dead. And that resurrection makes all the difference in the world. Indeed it is the turning point of history. The resurrection of Jesus means that this old world of ours is in his hands, and that is the best thing possible, because Jesus is wise and good and forgiving and entirely trustworthy. So that final part of our Lord’s passion prediction is good and glorious. But it is as if the disciples are so startled and disheartened by the first part – by the notion that their Jesus should be delivered into the hands of man and killed... they seem so stunned by this news that they can neither rejoice in the resurrection nor even find any words to speak. And so we have this first awkward silence. St. Mark expresses the matter this way:

32But they did not understand the saying, and they were afraid to ask him. (Mark 9:32, RSV)
In defense of the disciples, it was not all that long ago that Peter had tried to speak up about the cross of Christ, and he had been rebuked for that. He had been fiercely rebuked for that. In fact Jesus called him Satan. That remarkable conversation can be found in St. Mark Chapter 8, just one chapter before this morning’s reading from Chapter 9. The sharp exchange in Chapter 8 goes this way:

31And he [Jesus] began to teach them that the Son of man must suffer many things, and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. 32And he said this plainly. And Peter took him, and began to rebuke him. 33But turning and seeing his disciples, he rebuked Peter, and said, “Get behind me, Satan! For you are not on the side of God, but of men.” (Mark 8:31-33, RSV)

And so now, in Chapter 9, I bet the ears of the disciples are still ringing from our Lord’s rebuke of Peter in Chapter 8. Peter was supposed to be the rock of the church. Some rock! Our Lord calls him Satan. And that would certainly hurt my feelings.

But this whole scene permits me to clarify my rule at the start of the sermon. That rule speaks of “the truth.” Let me repeat it for you: If you should encounter an awkward silence in your life, be brave, and forge ahead into that silence with the goal of uncovering the truth. But Peter back in Chapter 8 is not seeking to “uncover the truth.” Instead, he imagines himself to be rebuking Jesus. That is how St. Mark puts the matter:

32And he [Jesus] said this plainly. And Peter took him, and began to rebuke him. (Mark 8:32, RSV)

Peter! What are you thinking? That is not the way to forge ahead into an awkward silence in search of the truth. Rebuking Jesus is not the way to the truth. And so Peter gets rebuked in return, with sharp words indeed.

Perhaps the disciples remember that sharp exchange in the preceding chapter and so now when Jesus again speaks of his death, they remain silent. St. Mark says they are afraid:

32But they did not understand the saying, and they were afraid to ask him. (Mark 9:32, RSV)

And that is the way awkward silences go. One person is afraid to press on with the conversation. Perhaps both people are afraid, and so they shy away from the conversation and turn to talking about something else.
To some extent my whole sermon this morning is a meditation on one of the most famous sayings of Jesus in the Bible. It comes from St. John Chapter 14. Jesus says this:

I am the way, and the truth, and the life... (John 14:6, RSV)

It is this middle term that I am lifting up in this sermon. Jesus says, I am... the truth! And therefore the truth can never be foreign or alien to Jesus. Plunging ahead in pursuit of the truth brings us more and more into the neighborhood of Jesus.

Awkward silences come our way in life. Husbands and wives look at one another, or perhaps look away, and there is an awkward silence. Parents and children look at one another and suddenly there is an awkward silence. Friends stumble upon a difficult subject, and there is an awkward silence. There are things that need to be talked about—things like hard stretches in a marriage, possible changes of job or where we live, wills and medical proxies and nursing homes. We fear to move ahead into the silence, as the disciples long ago feared to move into their silence when Jesus spoke of his coming death. But let us try to be brave and to move ahead into such awkward silences with the goal of uncovering the truth. It is better than living with a lie. It is better than living an illusion. It is better than living unprepared.

This is not to say that the matter of timing is not important. Sometimes things are just too hot to plunge ahead after the truth. Perhaps we should give ourselves a little more time to settle down, collect our thoughts, and choose our words. But if we withdraw for a while, let it be with the determination to renew the battle as soon as we can. The truth is a precious thing in this world. The apostolic exhortation to speak the truth with love (Ephesians 4:15) is a double rule: we are to speak with love, yes, but also we are to speak the truth with love. Again, the truth is a precious thing in this world. There is something divine about it, something that puts me in mind of that great saying of Jesus, “I am the way and the truth and the life.”

In the case of the twelve disciples in this morning’s gospel story I think it really would have been for the best if they had forged ahead a bit into the awkward silence. One of those disciples could have said to Jesus, “Lord, did I hear you right? Did you say that you are going to be delivered into the hands of men and that you will be killed? It sounds like you are saying more than what is natural for any of us, which is that someday we will die. It sounds that you are saying you will soon die, not because of sickness or accident or old age, because people are going to take you and kill you! Am I hearing you right?”

Such a conversation might have helped the disciples in the day of crisis. If they had had a more thorough talk with Jesus about his coming death, maybe they would have been more prepared in their souls and more determined to
take their stand with him when the soldiers came with their torches and weapons. But as it is, the disciples let the awkward silence defeat them, with the result that they do not do well when men come to take Jesus away.

Now let us take a look at the second awkward silence in this morning’s Gospel Lesson. This silence is caused not so much by fear as by shame. The story goes this way:

33And they came to Capernaum; and when he [Jesus] was in the house he asked them, “What were you discussing on the way?” 34But they were silent; for on the way they had discussed with one another who was the greatest. (Mark 9:33-34, RSV)

The disciples have fallen short of a standard they themselves recognize. Or rather they know that they have fallen short of a standard Jesus recognizes and which they feel they should too. Jesus has found them out in an unworthy conversation. They have been discussing who was the greatest. It is a natural subject for human beings. From school days we are led to measure ourselves against one another and to give some estimate of where we stand and to wonder who is the greatest. It is a natural subject then for human beings but not a worthy subject for the disciples of One who has come not to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many (Mark 10:45).

And so the disciples are ashamed. Jesus asks them what they were discussing, but they grow silent. Again my rule comes into play: When we encounter an awkward silence in life let us forge ahead into that silence with the goal of finding the truth.

Forging ahead into this particular awkward silence means confession of sin. The disciples are reluctant to speak of something that will make them look bad. But the path from here to there, from sin to absolution, requires opening our mouths and speaking the truth about who we are and what we have done. The path toward peace requires that when our Lord asks us what we have said and what we have done that we should go ahead and speak the truth. If there is a longing in our hearts to be clean again and to have a right spirit again then we should take that to be the prompting of the Holy Spirit who is asking us to confess.

This does not always mean confessing to a pastor. The appropriate confession should often begin with the one we have wronged, if that is possible and right. After that then it might be right to go to the priest. This is in accordance with the teaching of Jesus about bringing our gifts. Jesus says this:

23So if you are offering your gift at the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you,
leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift. (Matthew 5:23-24, RSV)

Glad to say in this morning’s Gospel Lesson, Jesus does not permit the awkward silence to persist. He does not let silence defeat them all. The disciples become quiet before his question, but Jesus continues the conversation by going to the heart of the matter. He teaches them a new song about greatness. He places in their midst a child. In this way Jesus turns upside down the prevailing notion of greatness. In this way Jesus teaches his disciples to look for a new standard for what it means to be a great person in this world. Tracing on out the story, we know that new standard: it is that we should love others, even being willing to suffer for them.

Our subject this morning has been “awkward silences.” They too are part of life that we can offer up to the Lord. We can forge ahead into those awkward silences, sometimes gently, sometimes with righteous indignation. However seems right at the time, we can forge ahead into those awkward silences with the goal of coming closer to the truth and with the image, in sacred imagination, of drawing closer to Jesus, to whom belongs the glory with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever, Amen.