[**Isaiah 53:4-12**](https://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/texts.php?id=224#hebrew_oth_reading)

[**Psalm 91:9-16**](https://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/texts.php?id=224#psalm_oth_reading)

[**Hebrews 5:1-10**](https://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/texts.php?id=224#epistle_reading)

[**Mark 10:35-45**](https://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/texts.php?id=224#gospel_reading)

THE GRAIN OF SAND Sermon for October 21

By Rev. Dr. Don Algeo

Something unusual happened to me a couple of weeks ago. I came home from church, had something for lunch, then sat down. It was a few minutes to one by then, and my plan was to watch the football game that started at one o’clock. Instead of turning on the TV, though, and listening to all the pregame chatter, I thought I’d just sit there quietly a couple of minutes, and then turn the game on when the digital clock on the cable box said 1:00.

So I’m just sitting there not really thinking about anything, and I felt a sensation on my forearm. I looked down, and there was a tiny green caterpillar just above my wrist. When I say ‘tiny,’ I mean really tiny, maybe half an inch at most. And when I say green, I mean really green, like a lime.

Now I’m no friend of insects, particularly when they’re using me as a highway, so my instant impulse was to reach up and flick it off my arm so I wouldn’t actually be squishing it. But just as I was about to do so, the caterpillar lifted the front portion of its body up and turned its head this way and that, exactly like a dog sniffing the air. Something about the way he (or she) did it, so calmly and without hurry or concern, really caught my attention, and I found myself curious about what it would do next.

What it did was lower its upper body back only my forearm. I could actually feel its two or three pairs of legs touch my skin, even though the legs were just impossibly tiny. And then it resumed its leisurely way up my forearm.

And by now I was hooked. It suddenly became one of the most interesting and beautiful things I’d ever observed: this little inchworm caterpillar, its color as delicately green as I’d ever seen, its movements as slow and deliberate as a pope driving slowly through a crowd in front of the Vatican, regally bowing to either side. Time literally disappeared for me that afternoon, and the next time I glanced over at the cable box, I saw that it was well past one o’clock, while my little caterpillar was still several inches below my elbow.

Of course by now we were practically old friends, it was inconceivable that I flick the little guy into oblivion, so I got up and repositioned him outside on a leaf.

What does that have to do with Christianity? Well, I’m getting around to that.

Let’s begin by reading our Gospel selection for today.

Mark 10: 35-45

This is the third Sunday in a row we’ve taken our Gospel reading from the tenth chapter of Mark’s gospel, and next week will be the fourth. It’s often argued that this Gospel is the most amateurishly written of the four gospels, basically just showing Jesus proceeding from one activity to the next, without much in the way of explanation or commentary. But I personally think the author is arguably the most artful and subtle of all the gospel writers, and I think chapter ten gives us a good illustration of that art.

The chapter basically follows Jesus through four separate incidents. Two weeks ago, Jim drew his message from the first of these incidents, in which a Pharisee tests Jesus by asking him to interpret an Old Testament law concerning divorce, and Jesus does so.

Last week, Sheryl drew her message from the famous incident involving the rich young ruler, in which the rich young man tells Jesus that he’s been very diligent about following all the Old Testament rules, and Jesus essentially says that that’s all well and good, but there’s just one thing more, something not mentioned in the Old Testament.

And now we come to this week’s incident, the one we just read together. In it, the brothers James and John ask Jesus a question with which he’s obviously not particularly pleased, and he gives them a somewhat mysterious answer, and the rest of the disciples chime in with their indignation. But whatever exactly that answer and the disciple’s outrage are meant to convey, what I’d like to draw your attention to is what Jesus has to say in conclusion, where he draws the moral of the whole incident. Let’s read it again:

*"You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them.
10:43 But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant,
10:44 and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all.*

And now we begin to see the art, don’t we, with which the author of Mark has presented these incidents, or perhaps the art with which the Holy Spirit has inspired the author.

The first has Jesus functioning within the limits of the Old Testament law; the second has him teaching the inadequacy of those limits, and the necessity of stepping outside and beyond them to follow him; and the third, shows him pointing to the radically new way of thinking and understanding He himself has come to introduce.

And isn’t that a lovely symmetry, when you look at it as a whole?

Which almost brings us back to the little green caterpillar. But first, let’s take another short detour.

In discussing this very same passage on earlier occasions from this pulpit, we have argued that the greatest challenge that accepting Christ presents, not just to our understanding, but far more importantly to the entirety of our lives as we conduct them during our allotted years on this earth, the greatest challenge is to come to see things the way Jesus sees them, to value them as He does, to measure things the way heaven measures them.

When Jesus rides a donkey into Jerusalem, he is not acting the part of a mere commoner. He is teaching us that royalty belongs on a donkey, that’s where royalty, true royalty, heavenly royalty, is to be found.

When Jesus shared what would almost certainly have been a rowdy table with tax collectors and prostitutes, he wasn’t acting the part of a good ol’ boy, the way a President might share a beer with Joe the Plummer. Jesus was saying that *this*, this rough food and cheap wine and rowdy companionship, this is what heaven is, or at least what heaven can be.

When he says that it’s harder for a rich man to enter heaven than a camel to pass through the eye of a needle, he’s teaching us that excessive wealth, from heaven’s point of view, is a problem, not a blessing. The things that wealth provide: admiration, freedom from concern, deference, luxuries, self-satisfaction and pride, these are obstacles, not blessings.

But you see how we rush to object to that teaching. We say, What matters is not the wealth, it’s the attitude we have towards the wealth. But that’s like saying, no, the cancer is not the problem. It’s the attitude we have towards the cancer that matters. But no. The cancer actually is a problem, whatever our attitude towards it is. And so is excessive wealth. That’s what Jesus teaches, and now we begin to see how difficult the teaching is, and what a project it will be, for each one of us, to adjust our way of thinking to heaven’s way of thinking.

And for most of us that requires a major adjustment. When Jesus washes the disciples’ feet, he’s essentially saying: Look at those young health aides washing the feet of helpless old people. That’s what queens in heaven do. If you would be a queen in heaven, learn to do that. If you would be happy in heaven, learn to be happy in doing that.

The life each one of us has been given is not a test, one which, if we fail, dooms us to an eternity of punishment.

The life we’ve each been giving is an opportunity to begin the transformation from creatures of dust into creatures of light, from earthbound, material flesh with its earthly point of view into beings capable of thriving and growing and finding fulfillment in what heaven has to offer.

And that brings us back to the caterpillar, at last. When I went to bed that night and reviewed the events of the day, I found my thoughts being drawn to those few moments of quiet contemplation of that little guy or gal creeping up my arm. It felt like I could remember every detail, and the whole experience, which only lasted seven or eight minutes, I expect, had a quality about it which I can only describe as timelessness: I became so engrossed in it that time really seemed to stop.

But when I tried to remember the couple of hours after that I spent watching the football game, all that came to mind were a few disjointed seconds of excitement or disappointment. Most of the time was lost to me forever, or to put in another way, all the noise and activity had now become matters of indifference to me, and I had no desire to let my thoughts go back and linger on them.

This is all sort of vague and touchy-feely sounding, I know. But I suspect it’s the same sort of experience that led Henry David Thoreau long ago to write that the man is richest whose pleasures are cheapest. And I also suspect – based on all the instruction Jesus gave us – that the experiences of heaven are much more like watching caterpillars climb up your arm than like watching a pro football game, much more like riding a donkey than driving a Ferrari, much more like serving than being served.

And so, Gracious God, our sermon prayer today is to help us reach the place where we can see the world in a grain of sand and heaven in a wild flower, where we can hold infinity in the palm of our hand, and eternity in an hour. In other words, help us to live and see and experience things the way Jesus does, and our prayer is in His name.