

OSLC Sermon – September 23, 2018
James 3:13-4:3, 7-8a; Mark 9:30-37

Grace to you and peace...

Oh, there's a lot in this passage we don't understand! Are we, like the disciples, too afraid to ask?

This is the second time in Mark's gospel that Jesus speaks clearly about what is ahead for the Son of Man. Last week Peter earned a harsh rebuke for trying to redirect Jesus toward a more acceptable path.

Today, when the disciples are too afraid to attend to what Jesus is really saying, they turn instead to what's familiar – the hierarchical structure that orders their lives, and defines their place in it. Even as they walk

along the way,

with Jesus,

toward Jerusalem,

toward exactly the events that Jesus is talking about...

they obsess over where they fit, and who they best, in the competition humanity has constructed as "life."

They are literally following the way of Jesus and at the very same time denying the way of Jesus! Doesn't that just capture the absurd tragic comedy of being Christian?

Last week Jesus tried to explain the paradox of abundant life – life as God intends – by using language of "saving" and "losing" one's life for the sake of the Gospel. Today a little child becomes Jesus' sermon illustration.

It's a great way to get our attention. What is it about small children that is so captivating? As a new grandmother, I find my arms aching to hold my granddaughter if a week has passed. As a pastor I am drawn to the little ones, longing to be for them a safe and caring presence; trying to go slowly as I watch them hesitate about just who this big stranger might be. As a congregation we strive to be a welcoming place for the littlest among us because we know that love and acceptance in community is how they will come to know the very love and acceptance of God.

The current cultural and socio-economic situation most of us inhabit today makes it a bit challenging for us to understand the radical claim that Jesus is making as he uses a child to define greatness in the reign of God. Our understanding of children is at least as paradoxical as our understanding of life itself.

On the one hand we as a society have come to see children as precious; as important treasure, worthy of our greatest attention and care. On the other hand, children are perhaps the very best example of complete and total vulnerability and dependence.

In our time, babies and children (that is, *some* babies and children) hold quite a high position of status and value. In Jesus' time, children, while loved and cared for by their families, were seen by society as without any status at all, and of not yet any value to the community. To understand the shocking claim Jesus is making, we need to be aware of that contrast.

In fact, as long as we are thinking about paradox, even children, precious and vulnerable, have become a source of competition in our culture. How can we ever get to the heart of what Jesus is saying?!

Jesus “was teaching his disciples, saying to them, “The Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him, and three days after being killed, he will rise again.”³² But they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him.”

Jesus was teaching the disciples about being vulnerable at the hands of humans; about being put at risk. Instead of listening, they turned to arguing about the values of this world. Jesus speaks of vulnerability; the disciples seek greatness.

A consideration of what greatness means is certainly a timely topic for us. We can easily name those considered the greatest athlete, or the greatest performer. We can find pleasure in arguing over the greatest novel, or the greatest movie. We love to boast about our alma mater being the greatest school. Our current president has a very particular understanding of what greatness means – and continues to claim that only he can “Make America Great Again.”

The competition goes on and on, and we are far from immune to it. Even in the church we struggle with comparing ourselves with congregations that have larger attendance, or a bigger budget, better programs, or more visibility. Within our own community we may harbor resentments over who seems to hold more power or who has more influence. In the depth of our hearts we wonder whether we really measure up to whatever standard captivates our vision. In pursuit of such greatness we turn away from Christ and from our neighbor.

The reading from James seems poised to speak into exactly this dilemma. The writer names for us the various jealousies and longings that spring from our desire for greatness, and identifies

these as the very cause of discord, strife, and violence. “Where there is envy and selfish ambition, there will also be disorder and wickedness of every kind. ¹⁷” the writer tells us. And then the remedy: “But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy. ¹⁸ And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace for those who make peace.”

In anticipation of the 100th anniversary of Armistice Day, and in coordination with Twin Cities 10 days of Nonviolence, we are exploring what it means for people of faith to “Build a Culture of Peace. In a world that thrives on promoting competition of every kind, building a culture of peace is truly counter-cultural. As was Jesus.

The Son of Man will be placed in the hands of humans, betrayed, killed, and raised after three days, says Jesus. And to prove his point Jesus took a little child *in his hands*, in his arms, and said “Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes *not me but the one who sent me.*”

Tucked away in a phrase so subtle that we could easily miss it is Jesus’ radical definition of who God truly is. Writer Debi Thomas explains, “One of the most central and amazing truths about Christianity is that God became a helpless human child. In this week’s Gospel story, Jesus underscores that stunning truth with another: *all children everywhere* represent God's heart, God's likeness, God's power. To welcome a child is to welcome the divine.”¹

And more, “...In the divine economy, power and prestige accrue as we consent to be little, to be vulnerable, to be invisible, to be

¹ Debi Thomas, Journey with Jesus.net

low. We gain greatness not by muscling others out of our way, but by serving them, empathizing with them, and sacrificing ourselves for their well-being. Whatever human hierarchies and rankings we cling to, Jesus upends as he holds a tiny child in his arms. Do we want to see God? Do we *really* want to see God? Then look to the child abandoned in the alleyway. Look to the child in detention at the U.S border. Look to the child a priest is molesting. Look to the child dying of gunshot wounds in his kindergarten classroom. Look to the child a parent is trafficking. Look to the child who can't access healthcare, an education, or dinner. Look to the child drowning in anxiety and depression. Look to the weak, the small, the simple, the vulnerable, and the helpless. Look to the ones who are *not* in charge. Look at the tiniest faces, and see God."²

We tend to imagine God in human terms of greatness; as all-powerful and all-knowing; as perfect and unchanging; as somehow wholly “other” than us. But again and again Jesus reveals a God who is tender and vulnerable, who is merciful, as close as our very breath, and dependent upon humanity for God’s very survival. Just like a child.

What will we do with God who is placed in our own hands?

Perhaps with this as our orientation we might see ourselves and our neighbors in a different light. Perhaps we might see Love at work through our own hands. We might seek not only what is best for ourselves and for our children but look out for what is best for *all* children, and for all creation. Perhaps we might see that God trusts us enough to dwell in our very midst. And our smallest offering will be more than enough. For God.

Amen.

² ibid