

Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost – Year B

If you think that part of today's gospel passage sounded very familiar, as if you had just heard it recently, you're right. Just last week, we heard of Jesus telling the disciples that the Son of Man would suffer and die, and then rise again. That's when Peter "rebuked" Jesus... and Jesus lit into Peter, telling him, "Get behind me, Satan!" Now admittedly, our lectionary leaves out several verses between our selection from Mark's gospel of last week and where we pick up today, but it shouldn't be lost on us that in very short order, Mark is bringing us a repetition of Jesus speaking about his coming suffering, death, and resurrection.

This time we're told the disciples "did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him." It seems reasonable to think that they didn't ask any questions because they didn't want to end up getting the response Peter got the first time this topic came up! But perhaps another reason they didn't want to ask any questions is because they were afraid to go down the road Jesus was leading them on. Perhaps they *did* understand that what Jesus was telling them was that if they wanted to continue to follow him, their world had to turn upside down. If they wanted to continue to be disciples, they had to let go of their own ambitions.

Their expectation of the Messiah, remember, was tied to the values of the world around them. The power wielded by the Romans would be overthrown by the Messiah, in their version of the story. And of course, those who were the close followers of that Messiah could expect places of honor in the new kingdom, could they not? And so, after not asking any questions of Jesus after he spoke again of suffering and death, the disciples proceeded to argue among themselves about which of them was the greatest.

The fact that they don't tell Jesus this when he asks them is telling. He no doubt overheard at least some of the conversation as they were all walking along. But when he asked them directly what they were arguing about, they did not respond – because they knew deep inside that such a "discussion" was all wrong. They had understood enough of what Jesus had been teaching them to know he wouldn't like it.

But Jesus doesn't chide them. Instead, he employs "Gentle teaching" – giving them a lived example of where he came out on hierarchy questions. First, he tells them directly: "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all." And then he demonstrates – taking a child in his arms. Children in those days were not the Facebook stars we see today. Children had no status, nothing to offer. They could be discounted. But not by Jesus, who sits down – gets on their level - takes one of the "least of these", wrapping her in his arms, hugging him close. And then he says, essentially, if you want to welcome me, if you want *me* to be your guest, if you want me to live in you, then welcome the child, the one who has no power or status. The one who can offer you nothing but its presence. And in so doing, you will be welcoming the presence of God, the one who sent me.

As preacher Brian McLaren puts it, Jesus is forever trying to lead us to the "down" escalator, while everyone else is trying to climb the ladder of success. Jesus said to Peter, "You're making your judgments based on human values, not God's values." In the letter of James, which we heard more of today, the distinction is between the wisdom from above, and wisdom that is *not* from above.

The little piece of James that we have today provides us with an excellent description of discernment, actually. James is telling us how to tell when we're acting out of real, God-given, God-generated Wisdom – and when we're not. And the "conversation" between this text from James and the Gospel is engaging. James says, "if you have bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not be boastful and false to the truth. Such wisdom does not come down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, devilish." Ah, but that is precisely what the disciples were in engaged in as they argued on the road, was it not? Their ambitions to be first, to be greatest, had led them away from the wisdom of God as lived in Jesus.

Jesus – like a good teacher – tries to get his message across in all sorts of ways. He tells parables about what the way of God is like – a tree with branches for *every* bird, a woman who looks for one lost coin, a farmer who finds a treasure in the field. He hangs out with outcasts like tax collectors and sinners. He touches lepers and talks with women. He confronts the forces of domination and hatred and violence of his day, not with violence, but with a message of mercy and love.

James – well, James – this collection of wisdom passages – is much more direct in some ways. Some complain that the Letter of James is too practical and not ‘theological’ enough. But James tells it like it is: “For where there is envy and selfish ambition, there will also be disorder and wickedness of every kind.” He was speaking to the Christian community of his day in a period of great political upheaval. No wonder his words speak so clearly and directly to us today! James is repeatedly urging his readers – and us – to live out what we claim to believe, to live what we have seen in the life of Jesus. And in so doing, he also brings to the fore the inconsistencies between worldly wisdom – which praises ambition and power and attainment of riches – and Wisdom from God as lived out in Jesus – which says the last will be first, the leader must be the servant, and the way to new life is through death to ourselves.

“You want something and do not have it; so you commit murder.” That’s bit extreme, you might say. We may not see those in power murder physically, but we certainly see that the powerful are very good at killing the spirit, at degrading and ‘trashing’ people, at attempting to discredit someone else to preserve the illusion of our own dominance and importance. That is the real evil lurking behind every kind of “ism.” James goes on: “And you covet something and cannot obtain it; so you engage in disputes and conflicts.” Think here not of physical things. No, in our present society and culture, what is most coveted is power and wealth and fame. And the bottom line here is that mostly, it’s all about me. That’s our culture now. It’s all about me.

But James offers us an alternative, grounded in the Wisdom of Jesus: “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.” This list reminds us of Paul’s discussion of the fruits of the Holy Spirit in his letter to the Galatians, with good reason. Both lists give us a way of judging whether we are acting out of God’s Wisdom, from the Holy Spirit, or not. The item on the list that stands out most for me is that Wisdom from above is “willing to yield” – which says to me that it considers the needs and the position and the presence of the other. It is *not* all about me.

When I read James, when I look at the disciples in the Gospel, when I look at the current state of affairs in our nation and in the world, I think sometimes that not much has changed. Ambition and greed still seem to rule. Violence begets violence. Those who speak out are still crucified in one way or another.

Two things in today's readings give me hope. One is in today's psalm. The psalmist is repeatedly asking for God's help. "For the arrogant have risen up against me, and the ruthless have sought my life, those who have no regard for God." I don't see that applying so much to anyone *outside* me – but to the ruthlessness, the ambition in my own self, the parts of me that seem to have no regard for God, that seem to fight against my *best*, my *true* self. And the psalm assures me that "God is my helper; it is the Lord who sustains my life." God will rescue me from those interior foes, if I follow the instruction from James: "Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you."

The second place I find hope is that in Mark's gospel – in both instances in which we've heard Jesus telling the disciples that he, the Son of Man, will suffer and be killed, he also says he will rise. The Resurrection is a full part of the story for Jesus. He lives what he teaches: that death does not overcome life, that love is stronger than hatred, that mercy will win out over violence.

If you've ever gotten an email from our deacon, Nancy, you know that her "signature" line at the bottom is this quote from Martin Luther King, Jr.: "The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice." I always see that as a sign of hope, a witness to a belief one can hold onto to weather the storms of violence and injustice that seem to swirl around us all too often these days. We need such reassurances.

We prayed in our opening Collect that God grant us "to hold fast to those things that shall endure;" – There are three things that endure: faith, hope, and love. Let us cling to all three.

Amen.

[Wisdom of Solomon 1:16-2:1, 12-22](#) or [Jeremiah 11:18-20](#)

[Psalms 54](#)

[James 3:13-4:3, 7-8a](#)

[Mark 9:30-37](#)