

St. Columba's Episcopal Church  
September 22, 2024 – 18 Pentecost  
Mark 9:30-37; James 3:13-4:3, 7-8a  
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This morning's reading from the Gospel of Mark always reminds me of young school children and their teachers. The kids are talking about something they aren't supposed to talk about on the playground. Maybe sharing a "bad word" they have just learned. Or giving each other answers to a homework assignment. Something they know the teacher wouldn't like. They think their teacher standing near the school building doesn't notice them. They think they are clever enough to hide. But the teacher can tell just by looking at them that they are up to something. So, when they file past her on the way in from the playground and she says, in a certain tone of voice, "What were you talking about out there?," they are surprised. And they don't want to tell.

So it was with Jesus and his disciples as they walked to Capernaum. "What were you arguing about on the way?" The disciples didn't answer, because they had been arguing about who was the greatest." Jesus, the Messiah, is on the way to the cross. He has been telling them that. Yet on the way there with him, they are talking about who is the greatest.

Jesus sits down – the posture of a teacher in his day – and calls his disciples to him. "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all." Jesus is a good teacher. He knows how powerful it is to show his students a lesson as well as speak it. So, he takes a little child in his arms and says, "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me."

What we need to know to interpret this scene fully is that in Jesus' time a child was at the bottom of the family hierarchy. A child had needs but no rights. A child existed for the benefit of the family as a worker when he or she became old enough to work. A child could easily be exploited. So Jesus' lesson about welcoming children is a lesson about helping the most vulnerable. Jesus is teaching his disciples that we should not be concerned about competing to be at the top. Our focus should be on caring for those who are at the bottom. The first shall be last and the last shall be first. The greatest is the servant of all. Those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the Gospel, will save it. These are the lessons Rabbi Jesus teaches many, many times.

All through the Bible we find lessons about how God wants us to treat the most vulnerable among us. Jesus opened his arms to welcome a little child, a gesture of care and love for the weak. On the night before he died, Jesus washed his disciples' feet to teach a lesson about serving others in his name. In the 25<sup>th</sup> chapter of Matthew's Gospel we learn that when we serve the least of our brothers and sisters, we serve Jesus.

We can't feed Jesus when he's hungry. We can't offer him a cup of cold water when he's thirsty. We can't wash his feet. We can't stay with him at the foot of the cross and share in his suffering as the women and the disciple whom Jesus loved did. Much as we love Jesus, we cannot serve him in his body. But in his compassion – that's how I see it – in his compassion for everyone who loves him and follows him, he has given us a way to serve him. We serve him in the church and in the world when we act with love for our neighbors, especially our neighbors in any kind of need. Jesus says that when we love and serve others, we show our love for him in a way that is just as good as if we served him in his body. What a gift that is!

Let's turn now to our New Testament reading from The Letter of James. This letter gives followers of Jesus guidance about how to live, how to put into practice the teachings of Jesus. The author points out differences between "wisdom from above" – that is, the wisdom that comes from God – and the "wisdom ... that is earthly" – that is, the ways of the world, where life is lived as if God had no claim on us, as if God had not given us all that we have. James presents these two contrasting approaches to life and challenges us to choose one or the other.

In the passage we heard this morning James talks specifically about envy and selfish ambition. In Christian tradition envy is named as one of the seven "deadly sins." We have all experienced envy, haven't we? We want something that someone else has and we don't have. It might be a possession, or a relationship, or a trait like physical attractiveness. We may feel sad about what we don't have or resentful of the person who has what we wish we had or both.

In the Old Testament book of Genesis (4:1-18) there is a story about the first two sons of Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel. Cain was the firstborn, a farmer, and his brother Abel was a shepherd. The two brothers made sacrifices to the Lord. Cain brought the Lord an offering of the fruit of the ground, and Abel brought the Lord an offering from his flock. The Bible tells us that God favored Abel's sacrifice – no reason for this is given – and Cain became very angry. Out of envy he killed his brother – the first murder in the history of humanity committed by the first child of Adam and Eve against his own brother. This story reminds us how very dangerous envy can be.

James challenges us to choose to live by the wisdom of God, not the wisdom of the world. How difficult this can be in this century and this culture! We are constantly encouraged by the world around us to want more, to "grab" whatever we can get, to get what we want right now, to constantly aspire to more and better possessions, to compare ourselves to people who are young and beautiful and rich and successful, and on and on. Without even realizing what is happening, we are pulled off the path of God and into a consumer mindset fueled by envy.

What can help us regain our footing? The wisdom of Christians who have gone before us teaches us that gratitude is our surest helper. If we turn our minds and hearts from a focus on what others have and we lack to a prayerful appreciation of all the blessings we have been given, we can find peace. This isn't always easy. It's a "spiritual practice," meaning that it takes practice to develop this habit. But it can get easier with practice.

Remember that in the eyes of the world life is a "zero-sum game," where "your gain is my loss." But in the eyes of God life is very different. We are all children of God, brothers and sisters in community, bound together by God's love for all. God's goodness and love are without limit. God's blessings are without limit. So, your blessing can give me joy. When good things happen to you, I can rejoice with you instead of envying you. When good things happen to me, you can rejoice with me instead of envying me. Again, it isn't always easy to see life this way. It can be especially difficult to trust that God wants our good when life is hard, when "bad things happen to good people." What helps me is to remember that this life isn't all there is. We are on a journey to God that goes beyond the life of our mortal bodies, beyond the troubles and trials of this world. We are on our way to a life with God full of blessings and love beyond anything we can now imagine. We can walk on with faith and hope in God's everlasting promises.

For these and all our blessings, may God's holy name be praised! Amen.