

Scripture and Sermon for Sunday, September 20, 2015

James 3:13-4:3, 7-8a

Who is wise and understanding among you? Show by your good life that your works are done with gentleness born of wisdom. But 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. For where there is envy and selfish ambition, there will also be disorder and wickedness of every kind. 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. And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace for those who make peace.

Those conflicts and disputes among you, where do they come from? Do they not come from your cravings that are at war within you? You want something and do not have it; so you commit murder. And you covet something and cannot obtain it; so you engage in disputes and conflicts. You do not have, because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, in order to spend what you get on your pleasures.

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.

This is the Word of the Lord, thanks be to God!

Mark 9:30-37

They went on from there and passed through Galilee. He did not want anyone to know it; for he 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." But they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him.

Then they came to Capernaum; and when he was in the house he asked them, "What were you arguing about on the way?" But they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another who was the greatest. He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all." Then he took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms, he said to them, "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me."

Let us pray...Amen.

The disciples were busted. Jesus knew exactly what they were arguing about when he asked them, and they were so embarrassed, they didn't know what to say. At least they didn't make things worse by lying to Jesus!

As they were walking to their next destination, they had argued about which disciple was the greatest. They were starting to get a sense that Jesus was really going to change the world. His miracles, his teachings were beyond anything anyone had ever seen. And his closest students, his closest disciples were on the inside; so to them, it made sense that they should make a case for who was the greatest disciple.

Several of them were privileged to witness the Transfiguration, where Jesus was up on the mountain top with Moses and Elijah. Others were told how important they were to the ministry. One had his name changed by Jesus because he was the rock upon which Jesus would found the church. Still others were witnesses to miracles the others only heard about.

It Jesus was going to change the world, and they were his closest students, surely there would be a place for them in the new world order, right?

We know at least two disciples requested that Jesus let them sit at his right and left hands in glory. We know at least one disciple is consistently referred to as 'the one Jesus loved'.

But the Gospels do nothing if not turn conventional wisdom upside down!

With the hindsight of history on our side, we know that Jesus was not a warrior, he did not conquer the Roman Empire with force, he did not arrive in the Holy City on a glorious white horse, dressed in battle gear. He did not conquer his foes with force, but encouraged his followers to turn the other cheek, to go the extra mile, to give the person who stole your cloak your shirt also. We know that he taught his disciples to love their

enemies, to love their neighbors as themselves. He taught them to welcome children so that they might welcome God. As an aside, modern followers of Jesus are about as successful at these actions as the disciples were: meaning we hardly do them at all!

Jesus was the very opposite of what the People of Israel expected or hoped for. He changed the world, not through force, but through sacrifice. He changed the world not through violence, but through peace. He changed the world, not through brute force, but through generous healing. He changes the world *today*, not by establishing some complicated hierarchy in the Heavens, but by touching one person at a time.

And yet the world still remains especially hostile to his ministry, hostile to the very ones he insisted are the key to welcoming God.

Some of the same human impulses that the disciples experienced in the Gospels are repeated time and again in human history. Self-aggrandizement, pursuit of celebrity, the pursuit of material goods, the sacrifice of the poor and needy so that the powerful can thrive, these not-so-modern endeavors fly in the face of Christ's teachings.

Competition. Survival of the fittest. Whoever has the most toys wins. The urge to be first. Gotta get mine before somebody else gets it first. The disciples were acting out the evolutionary skill of trying to be first. Trying to win. Because when you are first, you get the best food, the best place to live, the best spouse...you get all the attention.

There is nothing wrong with healthy ambition: Jesus said "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all." But this only works if we wish to be first in the eyes of Jesus. If we wish to be first in any other respect, first in line, first in income, first in anything else, the world will cheer our efforts, but Jesus will not.

Welcoming a child in Christ's name is important to Jesus, but it's less important to the modern world: according to the National Center for Children in Poverty:

More than 16 million children in the United States – 22% of all children – live in families with incomes below the federal poverty level – \$23,550 a year for a family of four. Research shows that, on average, families need an income of about twice that level to cover basic expenses. Using this standard, 45% of children live in low-income families.

Most of these children have parents who work, but low wages and unstable employment leave their families struggling to make ends meet. Poverty can impede children's ability to learn and contribute to social, emotional, and behavioral problems. Poverty also can contribute to poor health and mental health. Risks are greatest for children who experience poverty when they are young and/or experience deep and persistent poverty.

Research is clear that poverty is the single greatest threat to children's well-being. But effective public policies – to make work pay for low-income parents and to provide high-quality early care and learning experiences for their children – can make a difference. Investments in the most vulnerable children are also critical.

According to the Post Standard, the poverty rate in Syracuse for 2014 was 34.4 percent, making it the 16th poorest city among 585 cities in the U.S. with populations greater than 65,000. That's 49,626 people living in poverty.

Child poverty went up to 50.2 percent in 2014; that's roughly 16,656 children living in poverty. The child poverty rate in 2013 was 46.9 percent in the city.

This cycle of poverty has some dire implications: a child raised in poverty is substantially more likely to live in poverty as an adult: imagine what that says about the 16,656 children living in poverty in Syracuse today...

The difficult teaching we have before us is that Jesus expects us to serve each other, to serve others in his name, to welcome children so that we also welcome God. He doesn't want us to acquire power over others, he doesn't want us to control each other for his sake, he doesn't want us to strive to be more popular, more funny, more wealthy. He doesn't want us to blame others for their plight, or even judge them. But this continues to fly in the face of what the world expects of us.

And it puts us in an awkward position of having to decide if we want to set our minds on human things, like the disciples did that day when they argued about who was going to be the greatest, or if we want to sacrifice the worldly, and go about our lives as humble servants, literally and symbolically welcoming children to the world.

One of my seminary professors, Jim Poling, is a widely published author on child poverty. His contention is that the United States of America doesn't really care much about children. His proof is that our infant mortality rate is higher than many developing nations, that our child poverty rate is impossibly high given the kinds of resources we have as a nation.

His contention is that if we truly cared for children, we would have eliminated the kind of poverty and health care issues that plague us to this day. We would have figured out how to shift the billions and billions of dollars our county spends on war and war materials, and help our neighbors who struggle the most with survival.

Putting children first would mean we couldn't put profits first. Putting children first would mean we couldn't put our own pursuits of happiness first. Putting children first, especially the most vulnerable means forgetting about a return on our investments, unless we come to believe that moving even one child out of poverty is a success.

Jesus wasn't what people expected him to be, and his message wasn't what they wanted to hear. Today, his message is lost in the scuffle of people scrambling to get all that they think they deserve. And the children, the children of Syracuse included, are lost in the scuffle.

The disciples wanted to stand out in a crowd when they thought it would bring them fame, celebrity, and notoriety and favor with God. But when it became apparent that they were going to be associated with a man who had been arrested, beaten, and was about to be crucified, they abandoned him.

Let's not abandon Jesus. Let's find ways to follow him that honor and extend his teachings. Let's be resolved to be more gentle, less forceful, let's be resolved to be more peaceful, less aggressive. Let's aim to serve others before we serve ourselves. Let's try and find ways to make the least of God's children, the most impoverished children of God, the focus of our servanthood.

The over-arching theme here is about servanthood: if we hope to be included in the afterlife, in the Kingdom of Heaven, then we have to learn to serve here on earth. Serve the least of our brothers, sisters, and children.

Humble service of others and humble prayers for others are two of the most powerful ways we can act on our faith.

Jesus was not what the world expected. And his teachings aren't what we want to hear. But if we wish to be a part of the Kingdom of Heaven, we

will have to make some adjustments. We will have to make some adjustments towards some of the most vulnerable of God's children. And we may be judged by the world if we do. We may not win at the world's game. But that's a risk I'm willing to take, and I hope you are too.

Amen.

