

The Gospel that Jane just read is the second of three passages in Mark with a distinct pattern. In each, Jesus tells the disciples about his impending arrest, the trial to follow, his death and his resurrection. After his disclosure, the disciples make it quite clear that they do not understand him nor the nature of discipleship. So Jesus tries to enlighten them, to give them ways to think about discipleship that will stay with them.

Immediately upon learning of what is to come for Jesus, the disciples argue among themselves about who is the greatest. I wonder what that consisted of - were they comparing how many times they've been able to cast out demons; were they boasting about their healings - maybe even comparing which healing dealt with the most dire disease; whatever the criteria, they were intensely debating it.

Why were the disciples arguing about that? Jesus has just told them about his impending death and resurrection. But they, the disciples, do not understand; I can't blame them for that - we have known what those words mean for millennia and we can't claim to understand. And, like the disciples, we are afraid to ask, and probably for the same reasons: we don't want to look stupid or to give away that we weren't listening or forgot what Jesus had told us, what he's told them.

So perhaps, having their foundation shaken with this news, they seek to cover their self-doubt and fear with braggadocio and bluster. Making their case for being labelled 'the greatest' bolsters their sagging spirits; even those who didn't really get into the competition might have felt some relief in the hope that another leader will emerge. By the time they arrive at Capernum, things seem to be back on track. For the umpteenth time, Jesus seems to know what they were talking about. He calls them together - like he has called us here - and tries to explain the true nature of discipleship, the attributes of greatness.

James was writing about the same time as Mark and addressing, not the disciples, but the emerging church where it's obvious that everything is not going smoothly - once again envy and ambition have led to squabbles. In words that could come from Dr. Phil, James pinpoints the source of conflict as 'cravings that are at war within you.' He cites our besetting sin - want, want, want. Love, attention, power, wealth - want, want, want but not getting. And even in asking for these, James discerns that the wants of the want, want, want contingent are to fill themselves up with pleasure, with the hope that that pleasure will give their lives meaning. Want, want, want - the title of being the greatest; the status of being the most knowledgeable; the pride of being a leader. Want, want, want - is a terminal condition - there is never enough, never - once the title has been granted, once we've established our greatness, we go to work on not letting another overtake us.

STOP, Jesus says, what you are seeking is not true greatness; what you seek is not true discipleship; James says you think you are gathering wisdom, but you are not. What you gather is earthbound, unspiritual, devilish, dark. True wisdom is pure, gentle, flexible; it contains no partiality of hypocrisy. True wisdom is sown in peace. True greatness doesn't involve seeking at all; true greatness comes from being; being servant of all; with no thought of hierarchy, not even trying to be the last - but being found there in the midst of the marginalized, the powerless.

Jesus illustrates his meaning by putting a little child in the midst of them; "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me." he says.

Remember that at that time children were not the cherished beings they are today. Children were non-persons, not counted, never seen in public. The word used for child in this text is also used for slave - another non-person. For the disciples to be told that welcoming a child was equivalent to welcoming Jesus would have been shocking, and perhaps a little insulting. The welcome that Jesus urges is the welcome to be extended to an emissary of God. As the disciples have accepted and followed Jesus as God's emissary, so too should they accept this child. Their minds are totally blown. If they were confused before by Jesus' predicting his death and resurrection, now they are speechless. They ask no questions, state no objections. Neither do we.

What is it about a little child that Jesus urges on the disciples, on us? Yes, they certainly can claim the status of the last, the least, and thereby, the greatest. Did Jesus put the focus on a child merely for shock value? For an illustration of how far from worldly greatness a true disciple must be. Yes, I think that was part of it. But it is not just low status that makes a child a model disciple. A child has certain attributes that accompany low status that make for a true disciple. A child has no expectations. A child is in the moment; focusing on what has drawn its attention. A child will not try to do two things at one time. The child Jesus lifts up is not worrying about being the greatest - the child neither knows nor wonders about its status. Even as the lowest of the low, a child is not beset by self-doubt; a child is not seeking affirmation, not looking for things that set it apart, above, other children. The child doesn't know its status, so children are free to live as a child of God.

Would the disciples be closer to Jesus' vision, would we be closer to God's desire for us, if we lived free from worrying about where we fall in the hierarchy.

My experience of this was working with the youth. I still carry some of the scars of being a teenager. More than once they would be very pronounced before a Sunday night Forum or setting off on a mission trip. I would find myself victim of that crippling self

consciousness so rampant in middle school, in high school. This self consciousness would disappear in engaging with the kids. I became so immersed in their world; so challenged to find ways to reach them - that I never had a thought for myself. Days would end and I'd remember, "oh, yeah, I meant to go to the bathroom earlier". Yes some of that came from the general chaos of working with youth - one time when I was running the Christmas Pageant someone pointed out to me that I had my sweater on inside out. But chaos aside - and it wasn't all chaos, we had many quiet and tender times - in living into my call to pastor them, the selfish ambition James talked about dissipated. In this freedom, I was relieved of judgment. I was able to see the Christ light in the youth and feel it in myself.

This is the kind of attention Jesus wants the disciples to live with. A true disciple lived deeply engulfed in Christ; and lives defined by Christ, has no other status. This is how Jesus would have us live - wrapped in him as the only thing between us and the world. Jesus has lived through the horrors and the triumph he predicted. The disciples witnessed it; we re-enact it every year; and still we fail to understand. We continue the argument about greatness, the cravings that are at war within us. I wonder if any human can completely quiet this desire. Perhaps the best way to silence that voice is to obey Christ's instruction to be last of all; to be servant of all. To serve the marginalized. Perhaps more enlightening still is to act as Jesus says - servant of all. All, no picking and choosing who you will be servant to and who will not receive your care, your love. The Kingdom of Heaven has no place for lists, for categories, for hierarchy, for who's in and who's out.

The path to discipleship is articulated by James and well as in Mark. James says, "draw near to God and God will draw near to you." In obeying those words we live into Jesus' words, welcome this child and you welcome me and you welcome the one who sent me." may it be so. 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.