

Sermon, Father William J. Albinger

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In the name of our One Living God who creates abundantly, loves extravagantly and sustains eternally: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Those of you who know me, know I love the Bible. I never really read the Bible, let alone studied it, until I went to seminary. But being raised Roman Catholic and going to the Episcopal Church since I was 18, I heard a lot of the Bible read, year in and year out, each Sunday at Church. I learned in seminary that a lot of the Bible, having been written thousands of years ago, requires some knowledge of the cultures, histories, and politics of the societies during which they were written to get a good understanding of the text. But sometimes, we come across passages in Scripture that speak out clearly to us – passages that might be written now that seem addressed directly to us and to our issues.

Today's readings fall into this category. In our Gospel lesson, Jesus is ending his public ministry of healing and teaching in Galilee. He now focuses on the private teaching of his closest disciples. In Mark's Gospel, the Twelve do not get good press. Often they come across as inept and clueless. Today's lesson is no exception.

Jesus has just told them for the second time that the Son of Man will be handed over by humanity to suffering and death at the hands of the powers that be. The Disciples remain mute and are afraid to question Jesus. Do they not understand or do they not want to hear and understand? Isn't that often true in our own lives and institutions? We can ignore the inconvenient truth when it is right in front of us.

Later on, we start to see why. They end their journey in a town and go into a room. Jesus asks, "Say, what were you guys arguing about back there on the way?" Faced with their silence

since they had been arguing with one another about who was the greatest. They just didn't get it. They were the chief disciples of this healer and teacher who was drawing big crowds. This Jesus thing was going places and they were in on the ground floor. In short, they were arguing who was going to get what in our times is the corner office and the biggest bonus.

Jesus sat down, gathered them around him and took the place of authority as a teacher. He said to them, "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all." They didn't want to hear about the consequences of Jesus' ministry for him, let alone themselves. They wanted to fight for rank and privilege among themselves: Who was the best, who was the top man? Who was going to get the most power and goodies?

Sometimes words just aren't enough to break through our mindset, to get beyond our expectations and wants. So Jesus treats them like schoolchildren and gives them a concrete example. He acts out a parable by taking a child into the center of the circle and closes his arms around the child. He shows them who is the greatest, who is at the center of God's kingdom: he is 26 inches tall, has a limited vocabulary and undeveloped social skills, is unemployed, has a zero net worth, and couldn't return a favor even if he knew what that meant. In our culture children are, hopefully cherished. But in Jesus' 1st Century culture and for many centuries thereafter, children were the least valuable and the most powerless; they were at the bottom of the human worth scale.

Jesus' use of place is poetic. Being small and devalued and at the center of a circle of others was the place of a victim at a stoning. The reversal of expectations is startling. Here, by embracing a child, Jesus shows that the inclusive love of God places at the center the powerless, those victimized by others' selfishness, envy, judgment or contempt. Christ embraces and includes the powerless rather than expelling them. In God's kingdom, the devalued aren't shunned and brutalized; they are embraced and given value.

Think about what that scene, if acted out today, would look like. Who would Jesus' arms

be around? Think about our culture. What do our newspapers, televisions, tabloids and budgetary priorities say about our values? Who do we put at the center of our culture? If our media reflects our society, I would have to say that our heroes are seldom valued for their wisdom or righteousness in our culture that celebrates celebrity, wealth, power and self-indulgence.

Not only does Jesus challenge the values of his disciples and their culture, but he also gives a great lesson in Wisdom. He shows them what they must do to stop fighting and to live in harmony – to move the center of concern from self to love of God and God’s justice, that is to love the neighbor as the self, even - and especially -the least of us.

Our first reading from the Hebrew Scriptures is the conclusion of that great piece of Wisdom literature – the Book of Proverbs. Although it speaks of a good wife, it is actually a hymn to Lady Wisdom. Lady Wisdom in ancient Jewish literature was a metaphor for God’s active love and will for and in God’s Creation. It is evocative of the intimacy that is involved when we embrace the love of God and God’s ways that leads to the good life. We realize that God loves us first and best.

The Letter from James is in this wisdom tradition and could have been written to us and to every other human community. James is nothing if not practical. He was writing to an early Christian community that was in great conflict and warring within itself. Does that sound familiar? Have you seen the recent town hall meetings on health care reform and the signs at recent political rallies? Have been reading the blogs about the disputes in the Episcopal Church? All you have to do is pick up the newspaper, turn on the TV or go to any number of websites to find all the anger, rancor and intemperate language you will need for a lifetime – all in one evening! James notes that the anger and conflict found in any community are really found not in the presenting issues but within the people there. The problems are internal not external and arise from unrestrained desires, selfishness and self-preoccupation. Conflict can only be quelled

when the individuals achieve the gentleness that comes from Wisdom. James echoes Jesus' teaching by holding humility above arrogance, service and concern for the other's welfare above ambition and boasting. The Wisdom form above is characterized by gentleness, openness to reason, mercy and peacemaking, and above all, is characterized by respect for the other and civil discourse.

We don't all have to leave our lives and become Mother Theresa to lead the good life. A lot of people consistently doing small kindnesses, responding to anger with gentleness, countering hate with reason, and giving dignity to all can make big changes – in our society and in the thinking of our children. I'm like everyone else. When someone hurts or insults me, I want to push back. What I find important before reacting is to make sure I see that person as a full human being – I may disagree with him or her and be angry, but that doesn't rob them of their humanity. They were someone's baby once; they are someone's husband or wife, father or mother. If the media encouraged that thinking, we'd be a better place.

In picking up a child into his arms, Jesus embraced not only the powerless, but he embraced the future. He calls us to hope as well as the good life. AMEN.