

In both last week's and this week's Gospel reading, Jesus predicts his passion, telling his disciples he was a Messiah who would die. Last week, Peter rebuked him. This morning, Mark's Gospel recounts a reaction of fear on the part of all the disciples, such that they will not ask Jesus to explain.

Last week Jesus taught the crowd that to follow him meant denying one's self and taking up one's cross. This week, he will teach the twelve what it means to be great; that is, what it means to be great by Kingdom of God standards, not human measures.

Jesus will tell his followers to be great, they must be servants, a term that could fly right past our modern ears. Servants in biblical times were often persons indebted to another. The one to whom money was owed was the master, in control of the servant's life until the debt was repaid in full.

There were rankings among those considered servants. The word Jesus uses for servant is *diakonos*, the root of our word "deacon," used for persons who served meals to others. Deacons were among the lower ranks of servants.

We will then hear of Jesus taking a child in his arms. This scene is a favorite picture for Sunday school classrooms, but this image in our minds misses Jesus' radical action and challenging teaching. Unlike our modern adoration of children, a child in first century culture had no status and little worth until they could go into the fields to work. Jesus knew those without status were easy to ignore. So, when he implies greatness is about welcoming a child, and says by doing so they are welcoming him, his teaching is as much about hugging the homeless as the toddler.

Let us hear what Jesus has to say about being great in the kingdom, as we hear Mark 9:30-37:

³⁰They went on from there and passed through Galilee. Jesus did not want anyone to know it; ³¹for 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." ³²But the disciples did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him.

³³Then they came to Capernaum; and when Jesus was in the house he asked them, "What were you arguing about on the way?" ³⁴But the disciples were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another who was the greatest. ³⁵Jesus sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all."

³⁶Then he took a little child and put it among them; and taking the child in his arms, Jesus said to them, ³⁷"Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me."

Let's try to picture this morning's Gospel scene:

Jesus and his disciples are passing through Galilee. He is again telling them of his impending death and resurrection. The disciples are silent in response. Mark tells us they did not understand this death talk and feared asking Jesus to explain.

Upon reaching Capernaum they all go into a house. Jesus had heard the disciples arguing, and asks them about it. [Silence.]

Jesus had picked up the sense of their argument was about who was the greatest disciple. So, Jesus calls a team meeting, the gist of which might have sounded like this:

"You know, there I was spilling my guts as we walked on the road. I was taking great pains to explain to you what God has planned in this whole kingdom adventure; including, me being handed over to the authorities and killed. Not only do you not understand, but you are hanging back debating who is the greatest among the twelve of you. I felt like I was talking to an adobe wall."

"Well, let me ask you, who won? Who is the greatest among you?" [silence again]

"Did you at least agree on what would make one of you the greatest?" [silence again]

"Okay, let me tell you what it takes to be great in God's eyes and for God's sake."

Jesus then used an example that would have raised the eyebrows of even his disciples. Jesus tells his disciples, to determine who is the greatest, they need to use deacon servanthood as the measure. "You want to be great? This is what being great is about – the willingness to assume the work of a servant of low status, and to welcome and serve all those of low status or no status who come to your table, without expecting to be thanked, and likely to hear complaints." I expect this created a different sense of fear and silence among the disciples.

Let's leave the disciple's debate and Jesus' teaching about greatness for a moment, and turn to our James' lesson. The letter of James is considered wisdom literature, threaded with truisms. The book of Proverbs is probably the most familiar wisdom books of the Bible. Wisdom is not rocket science; much of it is common sense that does not require a doctorate in theology to understand. The letter of James might be compared to lessons one heard from one's parents or grandparents – or at least the good teachings and sayings they passed along, the ones where you may still find yourself thinking, "I remember when my grandmother used to tell me..."

James is full of imperatives, phrases that state what a Christian is to do or how she or he is to live, alone and in community. We have heard them over the past several weeks. Don't show favorites. Don't ignore the poor. Control your tongue. Do not murder. Do not commit adultery. Do not covet. Show mercy. Faith without works is dead faith. If someone is hungry, give them real food, not food for thought.

In this morning's lesson, James contrasts earthly wisdom with God's wisdom – wisdom from below with wisdom from above. Each one is known by its output. Wisdom from below – human, earthly wisdom – produces envy, selfish ambition, boasting, and shading the truth for personal gain. These lead to disorder.

Then James sets forth the wisdom from above, which *is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy*. One can hear Paul's words to the Corinthians in the midst of their disputes: *Love is patient and kind, love is never jealous or boastful. Love does not insist on its own way*.

Jesus uses the low-status "servant," to point his disciples to true greatness. For James, the word "gentleness" is just one aspect of wisdom, but in our day, it jumped out at me as a needed clear cut wisdom from above.

James is saying, we are not just to be good, not just do good works, but to be and do good with gentleness, born of wisdom – God's wisdom. In other words, the impact of our actions are not solely in the actions themselves, but known through the spirit in which they are done.

In my mind, the spirit of gentleness is sorely lacking in our culture. I am concerned we may be unconsciously ushering gentleness into extinction. Today, I hear and read myriad examples of people who believe it is their right and duty to sound off with no concern their rhetoric is mean-spirited or hate-filled. I confess I am not immune from buying in. When I agree with a person's point of view, it is tempting to laugh along at sarcasm or meanness directed at someone with whom I disagree. I might say, "I don't like the way he says it, but he is certainly telling the truth." I may seek to further justify my response by adding, "The other side does the same thing, or even worse!" When this happens, I am afraid we have raised the attribute of "telling it like it is" to a virtue, and given a pass to meanness and what can border on hate-speech. At such times, it would be good to pause, take a half hour, and read all five chapters of the letter of James. Over the years, I have learned not to applaud caustic sarcasm.

Unfortunately, I hear such meanness extending into religious language, where holy books are misused by people of all faiths to justify hateful outbursts and even violence. There seems to be a view that naming the outburst as divinely-inspired prophecy legitimates it. Those in politics label their mean-spiritedness as patriotism, blended with concern for our nation's security.

It is my belief that such speech is more pandering than either prophecy or patriotism. Almost everyone has a magazine or newspaper to sell or a book to promote; a TV or radio program to keep popular; a campaign to win; or even a congregation to keep growing. I think the common perception is gentleness will not increase viewers, win elections, promote books, or grow churches. The wonderful exception in terms of television was Fred McFeeley Rogers, a Presbyterian minister from Pittsburgh, better known as Mr. Rogers.

I expect most of us, if we think about those we most respect in life, those who have exhibited true wisdom for us, wisdom from above, are not those from the national media, or politicians, or even well-known preachers. While I marvel at those with brilliant minds, or incredible gifts of teaching or oratory, or skills of craftsmanship, when it comes down to those I most admire, those who have been most influential, it is those persons who have exhibited the gift of gentleness in their lives. Some have been family members, others teachers, professors, friends; they are the Mr. Rogers of our own lives.

Mr. Rogers once talked about heroes and greatness when he wrote, "When I was very young, most of my childhood heroes wore capes, flew through the air, or picked up buildings with one arm. They were spectacular and got a lot of attention. But as I grew, my heroes changed, so that now I can honestly say that anyone who does anything to help a child is a hero to me." [found online, attributed to The World According to Mister Rogers (Kindle Locations 501-503)]

What if we allowed humility to reclaim its status as a measure of wisdom and greatness? What if we allowed gentleness to be the gauge of whether we tune in or turn off certain programs, or personalities, or politicians? What if we, as people of faith, said the broader good will be found if we boycott mean-spirited talk and hate-infested sarcasm that borders on racism? – especially when uttered by those with whom we agree. I think marketplace forces might just make some folks control their tongues for fear of losing their livelihood or affecting their ambition.

Yet, as important as speaking out for a restoration of gentleness and humility for our culture, James and Jesus are both pointing a finger at each of us individually. Each one of us is called to live by a wisdom from above, which *is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy*. Each one of us is called to live as deacon servants, serving those of low status, and to welcome those who like children in Jesus' time, are accorded little or no status in our earthly culture.

The song refrain says, "Let there be peace on earth, and let it begin with me." I would suggest this morning's lessons add a verse, "Let there be gentleness on earth, and let it begin with me." It is Jesus' servant call to have gentleness and humility take root within us. It may mean consciously holding one's tongue before speaking, or pausing before we hit the "send" button, because we will first consider how our words will be heard, rather than simply asserting our right to speak or send them.

Sometimes, it would be good to imagine Jesus stopping us when we are so full of ourselves, or admiring someone so full of themselves – to have a little sit down to remind us true greatness is known in gentleness and humility. Jesus knows the world may well be silent and ignore our attempts at gentleness, or easily outshout our kind speech, and we could even be hurt for our humility. But, we follow one who died, and then was raised, so we might live as servants, moved by gentleness, born of wisdom – God's wisdom.