

17th Sunday after Pentecost 19 September 2021

Jeremiah 11:18-20 / Psalm 54 / James 3:13-18, 4:1-3, 7-8 / Mark 9:30-37

In the name of Jesus. Amen.

Good morning, and welcome again to our baptismal family and friends, and our other visitors. We certainly got to hear a dramatic Gospel reading just now, didn't we? A lot of words and emotions in just a few verses. And there was a great set-up for the gospel in our second reading, from the book of James. We heard a strong warning against selfish ambition, and advice on how wisdom from "above" can be so much more appealing than what's called "earthly" wisdom.

All the readings today seem to be about wisdom, along with fear and faith, in one form or another. And first along with fear we got some anger in our first readings! The prophet Jeremiah lamented the evil that was directed at him and prayed that God would take vengeance. Even in our psalm there are cries for help: "a stranger has risen against me," and a longing to see enemies pay for the evil they've done.

We see this kind of language sometimes in Scripture, and no doubt calling on God to smite our enemies can be dangerous if it inspires us to take matters into our own hands and do the smiting or punishing ourselves.

But these readings from the Hebrew Scriptures also have in common how seeing and naming evil can be cathartic when we call on God about it, to act against it. With these kinds of prayers we're handing over our enemies into God's hands. Whether God acts or doesn't act is up to God. We hand over our enemies, our anger, what we're feeling, into God's hands, where they belong. In our praying, we know and trust that God will work life and salvation for us, perhaps even for our enemies.

Then this morning the author of the book of James makes a connection between wisdom and the kind of life that God invites us to lead. He describes two kinds of wisdom, the kind that comes from above, from God, and the kind that comes from focusing on more earthly things, like ambition. He contrasts gentleness, peace, and mercy with trying to get ahead, to win at any cost. To be the greatest.

All these emotions bring us to Jesus' words in today's gospel, words that make sense of what's happening but first seem to throw the disciples for a loop.

Do you ever feel sorry for them? It seems like for a bunch of people who left everything behind to follow Jesus, they sure can have a hard time figuring out what it's all about.

Last week we heard Jesus tell them what was coming, and how Peter rejected that mission. Today is similar – Jesus again tells the disciples that he'll be betrayed, killed,

and raised on the third day. And like last week, they don't understand or don't believe what he's saying.

The disciples don't get it – yeah, they can seem pretty clueless. Today, they get confused about a couple of things: Jesus' words about his coming death, and about greatness.

Apparently while walking from one town to another, the confused and frightened disciples were bickering so much, like kids in an SUV, that Jesus couldn't ignore it. And when he asked, they're embarrassed to admit they were arguing about which one of them was the greatest.

Makes me wonder how they were comparing each other. Maybe by who spent the most time with Jesus, or who saw him perform the biggest miracle? We don't know. We do know Jesus wasn't impressed. He tells them, “Whoever wants to be first – that is, greatest – must be last and be a servant to all.”

Even though this wasn't as sharp a rebuke as he had last week for Peter, it probably still stung. To be fair, this wasn't what the disciples were taught growing up and living in their society. It isn't what most of us are taught either. We tend to think that greatness implies power, or accomplishment, or fame or wealth. Things that allow you to have influence over other people, to make things go your way.

But that's not what Jesus says. And then to bring home his point he picks up a young child, and tells the disciples that whoever welcomes a child like this, welcomes him.

Jesus goes from saying something odd, that in order to be first you have to be last, to saying something that really sounds off the wall. In Jesus' time, children weren't very important. Of course their parents loved them, but they had no rights, no influence, and no standing. The Greek word in the Gospel for "little child" even has another meaning – it can mean either immediate offspring, or slave. So how can caring for a child, somebody in last place in the pecking order, count as a type of greatness?

Just think, if we took Jesus at his word and imagined that greatness wasn't about power or fame and all that, but that we could measure greatness by how much we share with others. By how much we care for and love and serve others. What kind of world would that be? Imagine, the reality shows on TV might be competitions to see who was willing to be last so that others could be first. There could be shows that followed people around as they tried to help as many people as possible, instead of American Ninja Warriors, or American Idol, or The Amazing Race. Imagine! It would be a pretty great world, wouldn't it?

What Jesus calls greatness may seem crazy at first because it goes against our culture. He calls us to imagine that true greatness lies in service, by taking care of the ones who are the most vulnerable, those with little power, the ones society's most likely to ignore. Like a young child.

We can see how this makes sense for us as a congregation in our mission and outreach, but it also makes sense for us personally. Where are we at when it comes to measuring our own success, our greatness, by not what we take in but what we give away? Not by the influence we have on others but the service we offer? Not by being first but being happy to work hard to see others move ahead?

This is not easy stuff. It's different from what first-century and 21st-century cultures teach us. So it can be hard for us, as it was for the disciples.

They didn't understand what Jesus meant, and fell into the trap of putting themselves ahead of everyone else. Talking about securing their place in the coming kingdom. And we can do the same, trusting less in God for our security than in our wealth, seeking our own welfare rather than the welfare of those around us. They – and we – act at times out of fear. Fear that can paralyze us, and make us look out only for ourselves. Fear that can rob us of the abundant life that Jesus came to announce and to share with us.

We have so many fears – of being alone, losing a loved one or having a relationship end. Anxiety about our health or jobs, concern for our kid’s or grandchildren’s future, for the environment and the kind of world we’ll leave behind for them. These fears can drain pleasure and joy out of our lives.

Jesus’ response to the disciples’ fear, and ours, is an invitation to faith: to take a step forward in spite of our doubts and do a small thing. Like welcoming children instead of collecting powerful friends. Opening ourselves to another’s need, being honest about our needs and fears, welcoming a stranger, showing kindness to a child. In the words we shared this morning with August Maximus’ parents and sponsors, we welcome the baptized into the mission we share: a life of servanthood.

And each time we make a small gesture of faith – each time we find the strength and courage to reach out to another even if we’re afraid – the fear lessens. And in its place grows more and more confidence that fear and death do not have the last word.

Dr. David Lose suggests that three short prayers can sum up the Christian life when we consider Jesus’ teaching. In response to Jesus’ command that the first must be last and that true greatness lies in service, the first prayer is, “Lord, help us.” The second, when we fall short of our ideals and find ourselves trapped in insecurity and looking out for

ourselves, is: “Lord, have mercy.” And the third prayer, when we realize that despite all the times we fall short, Jesus still died for us, still lives for us, and still loves us more than anything: “Thanks be to God.”

Jesus doesn’t give up on his disciples, ever, and offers a vision of greatness that can lead us to work toward a whole different world. The God who created something out of nothing, made light grow out of darkness, and raised Jesus from the dead is still at work, keeping us from being overwhelmed by our fears and helping us move forward in faith.

The signature message of the Gospel is, *do not be afraid*. Jesus’ words are for his disciples in all times and places, in Capernaum and here today: “Whoever wants to be first must be last and be a servant to all.” And we can respond with: Lord, help us. Lord, have mercy. And thanks be to God!

Amen.