

Reflection on the Word: September 23, 2018
James 3:13-4:3,7-8a; Mark 9:30-37

I remember back in University, going out with some friends to one of the nicer restaurants in town. It was a special occasion ... we'd just finished a series of exams and wanted to celebrate. When we got there, it was busy, but there were only two or three parties ahead of us ... We spoke to one of the staff, saying we would need a table for four ... and then stood in line to wait to be seated.

Suddenly, a large group of people came in, chatting and laughing loudly. The restaurant staff seemed overwhelmed, and one thing led to another, and... our little party of four was lost in the shuffle. Almost before we realized what was happening, dozens of tables were being filled with people who had come in after us, and we could not convince anyone who worked there that we had arrived first.

I was furious. We were supposed to be first... well, third, anyway. But we were most definitely NOT supposed to be last. As I think back, I am amazed at how strongly I reacted in that situation ... how strong my emotions were ... but after all, we were there first, and somehow became the last to be seated.

The disciples of Jesus in this morning's gospel also seem to have very much on their minds the question of who will be first and who will be last.

Once again, they are travelling with Jesus on the road to Jerusalem. To be on the road to Jerusalem means something very specific, and Jesus comes right out with it, first thing. He tells his disciples, "The Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him..." Now this is not the first time Jesus' friends have been confronted with the brutal reality of his impending death ... the same thing happened in last week's reading, just after Jesus asked them, "Who do you say that I am?"

It seems the disciples have a hard time accepting or understanding that the path Jesus is walking will lead to the cross. After all, he is their Teacher and Leader - the one they believe God has anointed to save the people from all that ails them.

And so they walk on, and when they arrive at their destination, Jesus asks a pointed question. "What were you arguing about on the way?" But they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another about who was the greatest.'

Notice what Jesus does next. He sits down. This is a signal to his disciples—and to us—to pay close attention to the word he is about to share with them. To sit down before speaking is, in the ancient world, to take the classic teaching position of the rabbi. Jesus is claiming his authority as he

prepares to deliver a teaching—what may in fact be the central teaching of his ministry.

He 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 it in his arms, he 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."

One of the things we have to understand when we hear this, is the place of children in Jesus' day.

Because there's a big difference between how we westerners, in a developed country, in the 21st century, view children and how people in the ancient world saw them.

When Jesus spoke of welcoming children, he was not praising their innocence, or their sweetness, or their beauty. He was not talking about the way the sight of a newborn baby tugs at our heartstrings. He was not talking about the sometimes uncanny wisdom of children or their playful spirit. He was not speaking of their trusting natures, or their inborn sense of fair play. These modern day notions of childhood were not the reason Jesus commanded his disciples to welcome children into their midst.

Here is how one writer describes childhood in the ancient world:

Children were nobodies, the bottom of the social food chain. Children had no power whatsoever, they weren't given choices or allowed privileges. Children could be and were left on garbage heaps to die of exposure. Some of them were collected from the garbage to be kept as slaves. Depending on the hierarchy of the household, any number of people could decide that it was no longer expedient to keep a child alive.

When Jesus used the example of a child to teach about life in the Kingdom of God, it would have been shocking to the disciples. Children were expendable; those who could just as easily die as live ...

In our day, in some parts of the world, the nobodies are still children, or they may be women and girls, especially aboriginal women and girls, many of whom have disappeared or been murdered. Other 'nobodies' may be those who belong to the "wrong" religious or ethnic group, the drug addicted, those living on the streets. Sadly, throughout our history, we human beings have always managed to find ways to marginalize one another, to make one another outcast, to point the finger and say, "They are not us. They are less than human. They are nobody."

And Jesus is saying, NO. NO. The one you think you can't welcome, or don't have to welcome? That is the one you *must* welcome. You must welcome the nobodies, the ones without power, the ones without status.

Not only must you welcome them, he says ... you must embrace them... and you must be willing to be their servant. You must be willing to let them be first, and you must be willing to be last.

But none of us really wants to be last. We talk about climbing the ladder of success, and we dream about how to make it to the top. We want to do well, to be first, to be great in the eyes of others. But Jesus teaches about a different way, a way that intentionally moves downward rather than upward.

Henri Nouwen, Roman Catholic priest and writer, in his book *The Selfless Way of Christ*, says: ***From the beginning of my life, two voices have been speaking to me: one saying, Henri, be sure you make it on your own. Be sure you become an independent person. Be sure I can be proud of you, and another voice saying, Henri, whatever you are going to do, even if you don't do anything very interesting in the eyes of the world, be sure you stay close to the heart of Jesus; be sure you stay close to the love of God.***

And this is the struggle we all face – the struggle between the part of us that yearns to be seen as great, and the voice calling us to be faithful whatever that faithfulness might look like.

Some years ago a Theological College was seeking a new president. Over one hundred candidates applied for the position. The search committee narrowed the list to five eminently qualified persons. Then somebody came up with a brilliant idea: let's send a person to the institutions where each of the five finalists is currently employed, and let's interview the janitor at each place, asking him what he thinks of the person seeking to be our president. This was done and a janitor gave such a glowing appraisal of one of those five, that he was selected President of St. Paul's School of Theology.

Somebody on that search committee understood, in a flash of genius, that those who live close to Christ become so secure in his love that they no longer relate to other people according to rank or power or money or prestige. They treat janitors and prime ministers with equal dignity. They regard everybody as a VIP.

How do we move from a world's model which measures value in terms of wealth, fame, and power to a model which measures value based on Jesus' teachings? What is greatness in the kingdom of God? It is never about self-promotion. Greatness is about exhibiting in your life those qualities which are spoken of in the letter of James – a wisdom that is pure, peace loving, gentle at all times, willing to yield to others, full of mercy and good deeds... "If you would be great," Jesus said, "be a servant."

Someone once asked the famous missionary, Dr. Albert Schweitzer, "Who is the greatest person in the world?" He answered: "Some unknown person, who is doing the work of love." Our faithfulness as Christians has little to do with whether or not we become rich, famous, or successful in the eyes of the world. But it has everything to do with the quality of our giving and our ability to bear witness to the enormous, overflowing love of God for all, including those whom many consider to be the nobodies of this world.

There is a story of a little child who in church one Sunday, stood up and asked the pastor, "If God is so big, and God is inside of us, why doesn't God just... break out?"

Why *doesn't* God break out, in a glorious kind of contagion of love, acceptance, mutual forgiveness, kindness and civility? Probably because every one of us has a hard time not wanting to be first or in charge; a hard time not being judgemental; and so we keep much of the potential of God's love and goodness locked down and bottled up. But it is time. It is time for us to let it loose, and to let God do what God wants to do with our lives and our world. It is time for us to welcome one such child in our midst, whether we mean a child, or today's nobodies: you know who they are. It is time for us to step back, to be willing to put our status and our privilege aside so that the glorious contagion of God's love can break free and renew the hearts and lives of the little ones around us, even as it renews the face of the earth. Thanks be to God. Amen.