

The Least of These
Pentecost 17, Year B
Ps 1:1-3, James 3:13-4:7-8a; Mk 9:30-7
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Like kids who don't want their parents to hear, the disciples are whispering behind his back. They don't want Jesus to know that they're arguing or to hear *what* they're arguing about.

But like a parent who, without hearing the words, knows exactly what's being said, Jesus asks them, "So what were you all talking about back there on the road?"

When I was a preteen my mom found me sitting inside my bedroom closet in a fog of cigarette smoke. I thought I was done for, but she asked, as if she didn't know, "Whatcha you doing?" "Uhh...reading?" I stammered. "Well, you might want to turn on the light, Honey." She turned and left, and I just sat there, stunned. It was one of her most brilliant parenting moves.

Jesus doesn't confront the disciples on the road while they're bickering like kids in the back seat of a car on a long trip. He waits until they reach Capernaum, while they're in a house with lots of other people, and catches them off-guard. The disciples thought they'd "gotten away with it" and are stunned into silence, ashamed, "for on the way they had argued with one another who was the greatest" (Mark 9:34).

So human. So so human...

Our four-year-old tells us that when he grows up and "becomes a human" he'll do all the things we adults do. We tell him he's already human. Which is already evident: "That's my toy!" "I had it first" "Nanny-nanny-boo-boo, you can't catch me!" "I win!"

So so human!

But Jesus does a beautiful thing; he doesn't directly confront the disciples or shame them or prove he knows what they've said. Which is so magnanimous of him

especially when you consider what immediately preceded their argument; Jesus had told them he was going to be betrayed and killed. If a beloved friend and leader had just told a group of us that he or she was going to be killed, I like to hope we'd have other things on our minds than which among us was the greatest.

But of course, the disciples *do* have something else on their minds: fear. And fear can cause us to act all kinds of crazy. In their fear, they block out the bad news and see the good—that Jesus will rise again—as an opportunity to secure their place. Who will be number one? Who will be the greatest? If you're number one, if you're greatest, then surely you won't be cast off, right?

The Book of James offers a few scathing words: “If you have...selfish ambition in your hearts, do not be boastful and false to the truth....For where there is envy and selfish ambition, there will also be disorder and wickedness of every kind” (James 3:14, 16).

Jesus is much kinder and compassionate; instead of telling the disciples what louts they are, he uses their argument as a springboard to teach a lesson—this is so Jesus of him.

“Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all” (Mark 9:35).

My mom never once told me that cigarettes were bad for me, but after discovering me in a fog of smoke a lot of newspaper articles about lung cancer started mysteriously showing up on my night stand.

Jesus' “newspaper article on the night stand” is a little child whom he takes in his arms and about whom he says, “Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes...the one who sent me” (Mark 9:36-37).

What a radical statement.

Children were regarded as property, as we intuit by Mark's reference to the child on Jesus' lap as an “it,” rather than a “he” or a “she.” Children were expected to keep silent and not to draw attention to themselves, but Jesus draws the child to him and

holds the child—such a personal, loving gesture—and teaches by his words and actions that children are channels to God.

Journalist Celeste Sibley “took her three children to a diner for breakfast one morning. It was crowded and they had to take separate seats at the counter. Eight-year-old Mary was seated at the far end of the counter and when her food was served she called down to her mother in a loud voice, ‘Mother, don't people say grace in this place?’ A hush came over the entire diner and before the mother could figure out what to say, the counterman said, ‘Yes, we do, sister. You say it.’ All the people at the counter bowed their heads. Mary bowed her head and in a clear voice said, ‘God is great, God is good, let us thank Him for our food.’”ⁱ

We at Marley value children and know that they are channels to God. So if Jesus were speaking to us he wouldn't turn to a child to illustrate his point; he'd probably draw into his arms anyone whom we regard as somehow “less than.”

Take a moment and allow a person whom you regard as somehow “less than” to enter your mind. Perhaps he's a homeless man, a drunk, an obnoxious co-worker, an aggravating family member. See Jesus draw them into his arms and hold them... Then see him look us full in the face, gently confronting our fears and prejudices with his compassion, and say, “If you welcome one such child you welcome me and not only me but the one who sent me” (Mark 9:37).

Isn't that what we'd want Jesus to say about us to someone who found us “less than”?

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Jesus is especially concerned with the outcasts, “the least of these”: addicts, prostitutes, orphans, refugees, the homeless and the mentally ill, to name a few.

Jesus is especially concerned about them because their need is great and because they are particularly dependent on the care and compassion of others.

In their need and their dependence, in their vulnerability, are “the least of these” channels—uncomfortable channels—to God. “If you welcome [them],” says Jesus, “you welcome me, and not only me but [God the Father]” (Mark 9:37).

Welcoming “the least of these” is important not only for the obvious reason—that their needs are great—but for a less obvious reason: so are the needs of the outwardly “greatest of these.” The needs are simply different; the former need basic care—food, clothing, shelter and love; and the latter, whose basic needs are met, need balance, humility and compassion.

Consider Abraham Lincoln’s address during the Civil War, as North and South fought to the death:

We have been the recipients of the choicest bounties of heaven; we have been preserved these many years in peace and prosperity; we have grown in numbers, wealth, and power as no other nation has ever grown. But we have forgotten God. We have forgotten the gracious hand which preserved us in peace and multiplied and enriched and strengthened us, and we have vainly imagined, in the deceitfulness of our hearts, that all these blessings were produced by some superior wisdom and virtue of our own. Intoxicated with unbroken success, we have become too self-sufficient to feel the necessity of redeeming and preserving grace, too proud to pray to the God that made us.ⁱⁱ

This sounds a lot like our epistle reading from James:

Who is wise and understanding among you? ...Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist evil...draw near to God, and he will draw near to you. (3:13a; 4:7-8a)

James 3:13 - 4:7-8a

¹³Who is wise and understanding among you? Show by your good life that your works are done with gentleness born of wisdom. ¹⁴But if you have bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not be boastful and false to the truth. ¹⁵Such wisdom does not come down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, devilish. ¹⁶For where there is envy and selfish ambition, there will also be disorder and wickedness of every kind. ¹⁷But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to

yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy. ¹⁸And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace for those who make peace. ⁴⁷Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. ⁸Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you.

ⁱ *Bits and Pieces*. May 1990

ⁱⁱ Simms, Jeff. *Sermon Central*. July 2003