

Sermon for Sunday 22 September 2024

St. Luke/San Lucas, Vancouver WA

Proverbs 31:10-31; Psalm 1; James 3:13-4:3, 7-8a; Mark 9:30-37

For the Word of God in Scripture,

For the Word of God among us,

For the Word of God within us,

Thanks be to God.

Amen.¹

Our readings today are full of interesting topics. James alone reads like a “how to” manual for becoming wise and understanding. However, I’d like to spend a bit of time with the Gospel.

This passage begins with Jesus journeying quietly through Galilee, accompanied by his disciples. As they traveled along, Jesus took the opportunity to provide intimate, private instruction to his closest, most devoted followers. Once again, Jesus told them that he would be betrayed, killed, and would rise again. And, once again, the disciples didn’t understand what Jesus was talking about.

But, instead of asking Jesus questions, instead of dealing with the difficult issue Jesus raised, instead of addressing the elephant in the room, they did something very human, very natural, something we all have a tendency to do—they spoke of something else, something more manageable than death and resurrection, something more earthly, more practical, more normal. They began arguing amongst themselves—again—over who was the greatest.

It’s easy for us, sitting here in our semi-comfortable pews, already knowing the outcome of the story, it’s easy for us to laugh a bit at the disciples. As one sermon I read on this passage put it, they come across as blockheads.² There they are, arguing about who gets to go first instead of listening to the Son of God, instead of soaking up all the wisdom and knowledge and understanding they could when they had the source of all knowledge standing right there, in front of them.

¹ Iona Abbey Service of Prayers for Healing. The Iona community. Wild Goose Publications

² <https://cepreaching.org/commentary/2018-09-17/mark-930-37>. By Leonard Vander Zee

But let's consider this, perhaps with a bit more sympathy for the disciples who, by their own admission, didn't understand what Jesus was talking about. In our lives, both our individual lives and our collective experiences, when we are faced with something incomprehensible, something confusing and difficult, something we just don't understand, how often do we turn away?

And even more so when that confusion, that difficult thing is also painful? How often do we practice avoidance, do we change the topic, do we look for something that we can understand, something we can control, something within our power? It's easier to focus on the here and now, to argue about little things, irrelevant things, rather than address the big challenges in our lives.

How often do we argue over who is greatest, who gets to go first, who gets the best seat? When, in the greater scheme of things, does this even matter?

Most of the sermons read and the commentaries I studied focused on leadership and, in particular, servant leadership, and I'll touch on that in a bit. But first, I'd like to ask what, in Education for Ministry, is called a provocative question: Is this text really about leadership, or is Jesus using this opportunity to instruct his disciples—and us—about what is important, and what is not?

The disciples weren't ready to face the challenge Jesus was placing before them, that of becoming a resurrection people, of learning a new way of believing, of living, of being. Instead, they got hung up on the issue of who would step into Jesus' shoes, who would take his place as leader, if the unimaginable happened, and Jesus was actually killed.

Jesus' response to the disciples' bickering was not to tell them that they were wrong, or that they had completely missed the point. Instead, Jesus gave them one of the shortest, yet most insightful, commentaries on leadership—Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.

And then Jesus demonstrates what this means. He picks up a child, someone who in that society, had no power, no position, no worth. Jesus picks up the child, takes them in his arms, and says, "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me."

Jesus embraces the weakest, most marginalized person present, a child. Jesus demonstrates for his disciples that, even if they don't understand what he is talking about, even if they don't get the death, burial, and resurrection thing, even if their theology is a little weak and their Christology is cloudy, they can still do the right thing. They can welcome the marginalized, the weak, those who have nothing to give. They can show love to someone without regard to any potential benefit to themselves.

And in doing so, they can welcome, they can show love, to God.

Jesus understood that what he was telling the disciples about his death, burial and resurrection, was more than they could take in at the moment. It was more than they could face. It was a hill too high, a sea too deep.

And when they reacted in that most human of ways, by trying to compress this big challenge into something manageable, something they could understand, something they could handle—arguing over who would take Jesus' place as leader, Jesus didn't rebuke them or make fun of their lack of understanding.

Instead, he met them where they were and gave them something solid, something concrete, something understandable, that they could do—show love. And, if they did this, Jesus promised, the rest would fall into place. If they, and we, care for those around us in need, if we live as James tells us, with gentleness born of wisdom, drawing near to God, then God will draw near to us. When we live as Jesus instructed, welcoming all in God's name, then, in the fullness of time, we will begin to understand, and we will all find our place in God's kingdom. We will all become the leaders God intends for us to be.

I find this message particularly reassuring at this time in our church life. We are going through a lot of changes—a new presiding bishop, a new diocesan bishop, a rector search, to say nothing of our upcoming national elections. And I will admit that I don't fully understand. I don't know just what is coming. We are all faced with a lot of unknowns. It is tempting to focus on those things we think we can control, to begin to bicker among ourselves, or perhaps to choose to take a step back, to disengage, until all this change works itself out. But that's not what God is asking us to do, it's not what Jesus modelled. Even when we don't understand just where we are going, or what the future holds for us, we can reach out in love to all those around us, to the people in the pews next to us, to our families, to our friends, and to those we don't know, the neighbors in need, the innocent victims of the world's turmoil, the children among us. We can show love, and in doing so, we can become the leaders God intends us to be.

I'd like to close with A Leader's Prayer, one we can all reflect upon as we journey toward understanding, as we draw near to God, as we each become the leader God intends for us to be.

A Leader's Prayer³

Leadership is hard to define.

³ <https://www.xavier.edu/jesuitresource/online-resources/prayer>

Lord, let us be the ones to define it with justice.

Leadership is like a handful of water.

Lord, let us be the people to share it with those who thirst.

Leadership is not about watching and correcting.

Lord, let us remember it is about listening and connecting.

Leadership is not about telling people what to do.

Lord, let us find out what people want.

Leadership is less about the love or power,

And more about the power of love.

Lord, as we continue to undertake the role of leader

Let us be affirmed by the servant leadership we witness in your son Jesus.

Let us walk in the path He has set and let those who will, follow.

Let our greatest passion be compassion.

Our greatest strength love.

Our greatest victory the reward of peace.

In leading let us never fail to follow.

In loving let us never fail.

Amen.