

EIGHTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

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Our first impressions in reading scripture is not what is meant by a “plain reading”. Plain reading is, rather, to read the scripture, consider it, and sometimes just sit with it. If you do that with The Gospel today, you will avoid the first impressions that are not fair to what is being said. In fact, without such a plain reading, you will walk away thinking you heard something you didn't really.

Let the words of my lips and the considerations of my heart always be acceptable to you, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

The Rev Lesley Adams, now retired from being chaplain at Hobart College, once reflected on this Gospel passage and saw an instance that we all fall into, which is to hear Jesus saying something he didn't. I've done the same reflection on the last part of this gospel lesson and found what can be the same wrong hearing regarding children. One is the ambition of greatness, which Paul clearly says is an aspiring in consideration of wanting to be a priest or bishop, which is just fine. Just make it a worthy and holy ambition. The other is that because Jesus calls children into his presence beyond the barriers does not mean he's saying that children are inherently innocent, always humble, nor do they constantly by their very existence exude the wisdom of the ages.

The story is told of an Australian Sunday school teacher who thought she was being too predictable in her teaching and in the kinds of questions she asked. She decided to change her approach. The next Sunday she asked her five-year-old class, “who can tell me what is gray and furry and lives in a eucalyptus tree?” The children were surprised by the question and thought it must be a trick question, so they stared blankly at the teacher. “Come on” she coaxed, “Someone must know. What is gray, furry, lives in a gum tree, has a black leathery nose and beady eyes??” Still no answer. Finally a little girl raised her hand. “Yes, Suzie?” the teacher said. The child replied, “I know the answer is Jesus, but what you're asking sounds like a Koala!”

Kids say and think and consider the darndest things, don't they. And first impressions that seem – awkward or opposite need to be questioned. Even by children. I personally think this is a story about how a child is attempting to assist a powerless teacher. But we'll get to that.

You see that there are serious lessons in our relationship with God, and our willingness to be servant of all that must be our lens in reading scripture and seeing the kingdom of God.

Let's begin with questions that confront us immediately, our own first impressions with the questions of Jesus posed to his disciples.

Who here wants to be first of all?
Who here wants to be powerful?
Who here wants to be a leader?

My guess is that most of us have some hesitancy, perhaps ambivalence, even some moral resistance about answering yes to these questions. Unlike the kindergartners who immediately raise their hands

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and shout, "Me, me!" when the teacher asks, "Who wants to be first?" most of us as older ones are hesitant to claim our desire to be first of all.

Like the disciples of Jesus, we are reluctant to admit that we are even concerned with questions of greatness, much less having aspirations in that regard for ourselves.

Some of us have been taught that it is wrong to want to be first, to want to be powerful. We have learned that we should want to be last, to be powerless, to be servants. We feel guilty for wanting influence. We hold ourselves back from exercising the power we do have. We don't want to seem immodest, selfish or pushy.

Almost then as a deflection from attention to ourselves, as a society we are critical of those who do aspire to position of leadership. We have a prudish repulsion when we see it in others. It's OK for the kindergartners to say they want to be president, but not for most adults. Grown-ups who seek leadership positions are suspect. They must be power-hungry or ego-maniacs. They must want to get rich. We test them, watch them like hawks waiting for them to fall or fail. We belittle them in jokes, cartoons and editorials. The Psalmist says our enemies lay out nets and traps along our pathways.

Perhaps one reason we are suspicious of people seeking power is that so many in powerful positions have used that power to hurt others, and to attempt to gain personal power and prestige. Along with the "ungodly" described in today's reading from Wisdom [2: 10-11,] which by the way is mostly a large quote as an illustration not of Godly thinking but of ungodly reading, so make sure you have heard THAT scripture properly as well, again, we hear the ungodly elected officials, corporate heads, union bosses, even church leaders seem to cry:

Let us oppress the righteous poor man,
let us not spare the widow or regard the grey hairs of the aged
But let our might be our law of right,
for what is weak proves itself to be useless.

Too often we have seen power used to increase personal wealth, to protect the interests of other powerful people at the expense of the less powerful. As the lies are uncovered and we learn from decades of testing and investigation about things that have been spoken of in terms of self-improvement, personal or national. That government officials have routinely accepted cash gifts, travel, lodging and campaign support under the table, our suspicion of power grows. This is nothing new, of course, which means there is a foundation of non-trust for leadership. I did a quick review of our nation's and our church's leadership stories and I was reminded of the similarity of stories over hundreds and thousands of years.

Who wants to be first? Well, then, no honest, self-respecting person, certainly. You wouldn't want to be associated with the greedy, the dishonest, and the abusive. Common wisdom has it that even if you are reform-minded, an honest soul out to change the system, you wouldn't get very far without having to compromise your integrity. You know the saying "Power corrupts."

Even Jesus seems to agree. At least that is ONE way to interpret passages like the one in today's Gospel reading. Although that is our first point of contention in reading the scripture it is backed up though by language that we should aspire to be servants, rather than leaders only. And we should focus on welcoming other powerless people, (like children), into our community.

But who wants to be last? You see, that's an emotional hook we allow.

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Who wants to be powerless? A servant of all? Who wants to grow a community of the disenfranchised, the poor, the weak, the resident alien?

Perhaps here we can be more honest. Very few of us aspire to humbleness. We may not be opposed to starting out on the bottom rung of the ladder, but our aim is to come up a little higher!

And so we are left with a dilemma. How can we reconcile our longing to be powerful, to affect change in our world, with our suspicion that power is bad; that even our longing for power taints us in some way, aligns us with the "ungodly."

Let us take another look at the Gospel reading for today. As I said, one way to read it initially is that Jesus does not want his disciples to be "great." He has just finished telling them for the second time that he is going to be betrayed and killed (which is Not exactly an image of power and triumph.) And then he discerns that they have been discussing who is the greatest. So he sits them down and tells them greatness is bad. Do our ears hear him saying, "Aspire to be a powerless servant like me."?

Well, let's see. Notice that Jesus does not actually say that greatness is bad. It is the disciples who seem to worry that their discussion was out of line when they decline to confess to Jesus that "they had argued with one another who was the greatest."

Jesus – He is God after all - has perceived that greatness is an issue for the disciples. He knows they are afraid to understand his predictions of his own betrayal and death (and resurrection.) And he senses that they are concerned about who is the greatest; that they are conflicted about their interests and desires concerning their own greatness. And so, taking advantage of this "teachable moment," he calls them together to talk about it.

He does not say, "Whoever wants to be first is a bad person, is greedy, power-hungry and corrupt." Rather, he simply offers guidance for anyone who "wants to be first." "Do you really want to be first, to be great? Well to be truly great, here's what you have to do." The desire to be first itself seems to be affirmed as natural. Jesus does not even comment on it.

What Jesus does discuss is this paradox of effective leadership, two things to be held together as truth. If you want to be first, you "must be last of all and servant to all." What can he mean? It is OK to want to be first as long as you never act on that desire? If you want to be first in life, stay very quiet, don't yell, don't raise your hand, just walk to the end of the line. Sooner or later the teacher will see how good you are and reward you by sending you to the front of the line.

Then you will be the line leader.

Many women and men, girls and boys, have been taught that what Jesus meant was that they will be rewarded in this life or the next for always serving others first, for disregarding their own needs, even in the face of psychological and physical abuse.

The problem with these interpretations is that they do not take seriously enough the context for the teaching -- "Whoever wants to be first." What if we understood that Jesus was giving advice to leaders in the church- - the twelve and all those to come -- who would continue to embody Jesus' earthly ministry?

If you want to be leaders in the community, to be trusted, to ensure your own ethical standards are not compromised, if you want to be one of the great ones, then you must put your own interests last. There is nothing wrong with wanting your own voice to be heard, just be sure that all others have a voice when you use yours. There is nothing wrong with wanting to improve your financial well-being, just be

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sure that you attend to the financial well-being of the rest of the community as much as you attend to yours. Love your neighbor as you love yourself.

Being a good leader, a great leader, must mean being a servant to all -- to the poor as well as the rich, to women as well as to men, to Jew as well as to Greek, to children as well as to adults.

And, finally from the Gospel today, it is a child Jesus uses to illustrate what he means about the exercise of power. A truly great leader, the most powerful one in the community will receive a child. Why allow these children into this teaching? Because both in the eyes of that culture then in terms of worth, and certainly in our own received understanding as very fragile, and thus in both there is a clear dismissal of children as inherently power-less. If Jesus takes umbrage at his disciples for not letting them come near him, his rebuke tells us that to not let them come means the denigration of his own ministry as the servant of all, great God that he is. Not as a dependent, not as an obligation, not because THEY are particularly sinless, but because HE is; and we, although still sinful, are called to be like Him anyway. Jesus says here, in welcoming anyone, especially the least powerful in the community, in His name, you are welcoming Jesus. And whoever welcomes Jesus is welcoming God.

It's OK to want to be first, to be a leader, to exercise power. And as long as you welcome into your community everyone, as if each one were your savior, you will be one of the Great Ones.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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