

Wisdom 1: 16 – 2:1, 12 – 22
James 3: 16 – 4: 6
Mark 9: 30 – 37
17 Pentecost, Proper 20

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“When Will We Ever Learn?”

Pete Seeger wrote the words and set them to music in the late 1950's. The core of the song came from an old Cossack folk song quoted in a translation of a 1930's novel by Mikhail Sholokhov, “Quiet Flows the Don.” It has been recorded many times, in languages all over the world. You might remember “Where Have all the Flowers Gone.” I am now going to pause while you all sing it to yourselves and try to get that tune out of your heads so you can listen to the rest of the sermon. That challenge is called an earworm. Can I go on now?

That earworm has been in my head as I have thought about our Gospel reading for this morning. Jesus is back home in Israel, having traversed widely across Jewish and non-Jewish territory, spreading His message and performing astonishing, and upsetting, deeds of power with all sorts of unlikely and strange people. But the mood has darkened because Jesus is openly talking about what will happen to him – and soon. This will not end well for Jesus, and, by inference it will not end well for his followers. Indeed, all of our readings this morning are remarkably depressing. You can almost hear Jesus humming that Pete Seeger song as he walked back to Capernaum. For Jesus knows the arc of his ministry all too well. His deeds of power, his powerful preaching, his message of the coming of the kingdom is moving further and further from the earthly hopes of his followers. This arc of salvation and good news is unlike any his followers have heard or hoped for.

And we know this because of those arguments that went on as the disciples made their trek back to Capernaum. Perhaps bored by the dust of their travels, and made nervous by the claims of their leader that this whole mad enterprise was going to end in disaster, the disciples have spent time arguing about which of them was the greatest. They are afraid to answer the question posed by Jesus – “what were you arguing about along the way?” I suppose they were afraid because they knew what a petty and self-absorbed debate that was. And, perhaps, because Jesus knew full well that they had been squabbling like small children about inconsequential matters.

We might ask ourselves that same question today. “What have we been arguing about along the way – the Way of Jesus?” The world shudders under the assaults of pollution and environmental degradation – what are we arguing about? Children die daily from hunger, from violence, from neglect – what are we arguing about? People flee from violence and ethnic and racial hatred, literally at sea with nowhere to go – what are we arguing about? Turns out the same thing the disciples were arguing about – who among us is the greatest. We seem incapable of moving beyond our little internal jostling for power – we are, in some ways, intent on re-arranging the deck chairs as our ship of state – our world – is sinking. We spend precious time and energy worrying about protocol and process such that we never get to product. Of course, for the disciples and us, all that is the wrong argument – a meaningless argument that avoids the direction that Jesus points toward.

So, Jesus sets them down and, one more time, seeks to educate them about the arc of his earthly ministry. As we know – at least in our heads if not in our hearts – leadership in the kingdom of God is not like leadership on earth. This is servant

leadership, this is taking the lesser part, this is about being a servant to the least of us so that all of us might grow and flourish. This is about not eating until all are fed, not sleeping until all have a place to rest, not resting until all are found and made safe.

His method of driving home this point does require a bit of explanation for us. Jesus takes a little child and puts it among his disciples – as if to show this little child is also a disciple, and then, without a word, Jesus takes the child in his arms – a gesture of intimacy and relationship that actually violates the social and cultural norms of his day. This is not the child of Jesus, not likely even a relative of his so his demonstration of deep, intimate relationship is extraordinary. But, for us, this seems like a Hallmark moment for we are very sentimental as a culture about children – at least in our public relations. We like to think of ourselves as a nation devoted to the welfare and proper upbringing of children. Particularly here on Bainbridge Island, we pride ourselves on being totally focused on raising the best and brightest children the world has ever seen – or heads will roll. The numbers reveal a more complicated picture since, for example, the US ranks 34th among all nations in child mortality rates – just behind Cuba. But we do love children and putting them on the face of a problem often generates more interest in addressing that problem.

This was not the case in the ancient world. Children, though loved and desired, were not given much status in their communities. Infant and child mortality was high. It was not until the child was grown that status was given. Children were seen – on occasion – but never listened to by any adult. Other people's children were even more unimportant. So for Jesus to take a stranger's child and treat it like his own kin is itself amazing. But then to argue that whoever welcomes

someone with no status, no importance, no real worth, welcomes me – a leader, teacher, healer, and man of importance, is statement of stunning upset. I am confident that one of the disciples must have thought Jesus was sun-struck or delirious. How could a child have the same importance as a devoted follower of Jesus? And wasn't there supposed to be a pleasant outcome when the world was turned upside down by Jesus and his followers? Where was the nice villa and the creature comforts that always came to the victor? It must have all seemed to the disciples to be quite inexplicable. This thing that had completely altered their lives, this man who took them off to strange places, who talked with unclean people, who ate with strangers, who scared them with deeds of power, who could grab and hold the attention of thousands out in the middle of nowhere, this astonishing person who filled their hearts with hope and joy, this Jesus, was going to die yet rise again? His intentional disruption of their world was truly complete. They could grasp Jewish peasants taking back their lands. They could envision a Messiah that would drive out the hated Roman overlords. They could imagine corrupt rulers put aside. They could hope for better days so they could live in peace.

They had a harder time imagining that this would not enrich them along the way and it was really hard to imagine a world in which the very least person would be given status and power and respect just like the status and power and respect they thought would be their inheritance. Not much has changed in two thousand years. We still struggle with the whole message of God in Christ Jesus. We still argue about who among us is the greatest.

But earlier, I put that song in your heads and I did so because it is a circular story song. The flowers go to young girls who go to husbands who go to be soldiers

who go to graveyards, and graveyards go to flowers and the cycle continues. And the refrain is “when will they ever learn?”

Our circular story song is that the last shall be first and the first shall be last. Our song is that perfect leadership is servant leadership. Our song is about that little child among us and how we treat the unloved, the unwanted, and the lowest of us tells God everything about the rest of us.

So here are two earworms that I hope stay in all of our minds – “What have we been arguing about along the Way – the Way of Jesus?” “When will we ever learn?” Amen.