

Jeremiah 11:18-20, Psalm 54, James 3:13-4:3, 7-8a, Mark 9:30-37

“But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality and hypocrisy.”

In our Gospel passage today, we can see that Jesus has a lot of work to do to change his disciples’ perception of what Christian discipleship is like. There’s a lot of misunderstanding on the parts of the disciples, and they have a lot of expectations that Jesus has no intention of meeting.

Jesus begins this passage by foretelling his death - for the second time in the Gospel according to St. Mark. When he did this one chapter ago, St. Peter actually took Jesus aside to rebuke him – to tell Jesus that this was an inappropriate way of talking.

Perhaps St. Peter was concerned that such language about being killed would lead to a misunderstanding by the people. It seems clear that the disciples did not think that Jesus meant that he was *literally* going to be killed. They must have thought it was some kind of parable – some kind of metaphorical language - because St. Mark tells us that “they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him”. If Jesus meant that he was going to be literally killed, there is not much to misunderstand.

The people of Israel’s expectation about what their messiah would do were generally focused on political liberation. They hoped that the messiah would free them from Roman rule, allowing them to have their own country once again, as they had under King David and others in the time of the Old Testament.

So when Jesus began talking about dying and rising, the disciples did not understand what he was trying to say. But they must have thought that Jesus was preparing for some big event – hopefully taking back the kingdom from the Romans - because after Jesus made this statement about dying and rising in our passage today, the disciples got together and argued about who was the greatest.

I suppose they were starting to think about what each of their positions would be in the new kingdom. They were jockeying for status and power. And they seem to have thought that by arguing with each other they would have some control over establishing who got that status and power.

So the disciples expect Jesus to not actually die. They probably expect him to set up a political kingdom soon. And each seems to expect to need to wrestle their way to the top tiers of power in that kingdom.

But Jesus has something totally different in mind for his disciples, that isn’t going to meet any of these expectations.

He is actually going to suffer and die. He’s not going to use his great power to protect himself and establish an earthly kingdom. He’s going to show the limitless power of his love for us by giving up his life for us. And his love is going to conquer death. It’s going to offer us the chance to live without fear, trusting in God’s power to preserve our souls and bring life again even out of the darkness of the grave.

But Jesus’ love is not going to save his followers from ever experiencing any suffering, just as Jesus himself won’t live without suffering. And he’s not going to give his most loyal followers “perks” like the status, prestige, and authority they seem to be arguing over. Instead, he’s going to invite them to behave like servants to each other.

Jesus has his work cut out for him, because he is inviting his disciples into a kingdom whose most important value is love.

And that means he's inviting them – and us! – into a kingdom where we put others' needs before our own. Where we “outdo each other in showing honor” to each other. Where we lay down our lives for each other. Where authority and leadership don't have the “perks” we expect, because authority and leadership are based on sacrifice, on gentleness, on how we serve others.

And Jesus demonstrates this by taking a little child and putting it among the disciples. It's hard for us to feel this today, but this was a shocking action in the ancient world! Young children were not valued and respected in the ancient world the way they are, at least to a greater extent, in our present culture. We tend to treat children living among us as individuals with dignity and rights most of the time, but in the ancient world they were seen pretty much as the property of their parents, without rights or respect until they became adults.

For people at the time of this gospel passage, the contrast of putting a little child with a prominent religious teacher and his followers would be a little more like how we would feel if we watched a presidential debate and one of the podiums was randomly reserved for an uneducated homeless man, or perhaps a felon. It was a contrast that didn't even make sense to the disciples.

So perhaps we have come some way as a society towards the mind of Christ. Today we do have a higher sense of the dignity and value of the children who live among us. So that's at least one step toward “respecting the dignity of every human being”. Towards seeking and serving Christ in all people.

But in so many ways we don't structure our society around love, and we don't behave as though our expectations about value and importance and authority have changed much.

Imagine, for instance, if we applied the standard for wisdom we heard today from St. James to presidential campaigns or debates. St. James says: “the wisdom from above is first pure, then *peaceable, gentle, willing to yield*, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality and hypocrisy.”

It's very hard to structure our society by this standard. It's very hard to live our *personal lives* by this standard. So often a person's educational level, or their appearance, or how clean they are, or their ideology or personality profoundly influence how we treat them, whether we associate with them, the amount of respect we honestly have for them.

A lot of times when I hear people talk about the disciples, especially as they are portrayed in the gospel according to St. Mark, I hear them say things like, “Oh, they're kind of dim – they're not so bright. They just don't get what Jesus is saying. How can they not get it?”

But honestly, Jesus' teachings are very hard. They're hard for all of us. It goes against the society we're brought up in (whatever that society may be) and it goes against the instincts of our own hearts to live with others with the kind of love Jesus has for us.

We struggle as much as Jesus' first followers did to live the way he calls his disciples to live. We struggle to look on others the way Jesus looks on them – whether those others are our family members, or our neighbors, or classmates or colleagues, or rivals at work or school. Or people who irritate us, or people who hold different religious or political views than us, or people who frighten us, or hurt us.

As hard to believe in our heart of hearts as it actually is, Jesus loves all of *those* people. And he even loves *us*, despite all our unkind thoughts and words, our hypocrisies and pettiness and grudges. His love is actually that big. And it's actually powerful – the most powerful thing on earth.

And every day, we once again are invited by Jesus to try to walk in his footsteps, to love with a love like his, and to be a disciple.