

25th Sunday in Ordinary Time, 19 September 2021

Scriptures: Wisdom 2:12,17-20; James 3:16--4:3; Mark 9:30-37

Homily: Fr. Ken

For most people, it feels good to belong: to belong to one's family, to a group of friends, to a team—to be part of something bigger than oneself. Belonging creates feelings of comfort, joy, peace, and purpose.

Thinking about the apostles in the Gospel story this morning: How good must it have felt to be chosen as one of the Twelve Apostles? And, to have an inkling, then the growing certainty that the one who chose you is not just a man, but the Son of Man, the Messiah? The one who called you to be among the inner circle, to be at the heart of the kingdom-building prophet, was the very one prophesized throughout the ages. It is hard not to imagine the apostles getting a little pumped up about being the chosen Twelve.

You may remember just over fifty years ago, in 1970, the #1 best selling album was the rock-opera "Jesus Christ Superstar". In one song, the apostles were singing about themselves. They sang:

*Look at all my trials and tribulations
Sinking in a gentle pool of wine
Don't disturb me now I can see the answers
Till this evening is this morning life is fine
Always hoped that I'd be an apostle
Knew that I would make it if I tried
Then when we retire we can write the gospels
So they'll still talk about us when we've died.*

This is the general context for understanding their behavior on the way through Galilee, when Jesus was telling them: "The Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him, and three days after being killed, he will rise again".

The Gospel of Mark tells us that the apostles did not understand what Jesus was saying, and that they "were afraid to ask him".

Was this fear simply a desire not to hear Jesus, not to distract from their own scenarios of the future? It turns out that they had been arguing among themselves about "who was the greatest".

In a certain sense it's normal. We can imagine a young person saying: "I don't just want to be a soccer player. I want to be the greatest soccer player". And it does not seem inherently problematic to want to fulfill one's human abilities and gifts to the very best of one's ability.

So, what is the problem in this Gospel story? Jesus presents to his apostles a spiritual world in which true greatness is measured not by human striving or boundless ambition but by serving those in need. This is a gift and an ability that does not rely on pre-eminence or superiority, but on being present for those in need.

It is in caring for the little ones, Jesus says, that his apostles live up to the call of the Gospel. Jesus offers as an example a "little child" 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". The treatment of the child becomes the measure of greatness because it demands true humility and service. Loving a child does not offer prestige, honor, or wealth, especially when a little child in the days of antiquity was generally in the care of mothers, nurses, or slaves. This was not the work of a man, and certainly not the hand-picked apostles of Jesus the Messiah.

Yet, the deep wisdom of God is at work here, for we are all children of God, dependent at all points in our lives on the service of others, in varying and different ways. Spiritual humility is not the manifestation of a lack of self-esteem or a sense that we are unloved and unlovable, but the acknowledgement that we are dependent upon God and others, even for the genuine gifts and vocations we are to express for others.

To recognize that we are called as disciples of Jesus is to be at the service of others, especially young people and all others who are vulnerable, marginalized, and otherwise forgotten.

To serve the needy orients our relationships with others, for when our desires are "out of order" as St. James writes, our relationships become disordered.

We fulfill our desires when we belong, when we are loved, and when we are part of something. Jesus calls us to our faith community for this purpose, to care for those whose own hopes for belonging have been dashed. When we bring our many human gifts to the service of others, true greatness emerges with every act of love and every word of compassion.

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