

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

When Albert Einstein arrived at Princeton University in the 1940s, he was given the best office on campus. It had a study, a parlor, and it opened onto its own private garden. The other faculty members at Princeton accepted the arrangement grudgingly. They were forced to admit if someone else had to have that particular office on campus, it might as well be Professor Einstein. Everything went fine until 1955 when Einstein died in his sleep. The Princeton faculty was assembled and told that Einstein was dead. There came a quick gasp of surprise, then from the back of the room came a voice. “So who gets his office?” and what an office it was. A study, a parlor, and it opened onto its own private garden.

Sounds a bit like the present day world, don't you think? The bigger office, the more important the person is. I don't know whether it is true or not, but I have been told that in some corporations, and in the government, the size of the office and where the office is located, speaks to the rank of the person who occupies it. There is a standing joke among the staff here about my study. When things are trying and difficult for me, and the staff is aware that I am having a hard time, they tell me now to complain. What is happening to me is to be expected, since my office has four windows.

The disciples, you see, are debating the same sort of issue. Who is the greatest, was their question? Who was it that would hit the top of discipleship rankings? Then horror of horrors, Jesus asks them just after talking about his death and suffering, “What were you talking about?” Their immediate reaction is silence. They've been caught out. Jesus touches on they're all too human pettiness and self-centeredness for they have been entirely focused on themselves and their status as Jesus' followers.

But notice, Jesus neither criticizes them nor condemns them. He doesn't bawl them out. Instead he sits down. I like to think that he probably took a pretty deep breath as well. Then He said to them, “Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.” A servant, a slave, the lowest member of any household, in Jesus' time. Do you remember the Last Supper? Jesus began by taking water and a towel and washing feet. Washing their feet! The most menial of household tasks, that a household servant would do, is to wash the feet of the guests when they arrived. Remember how they traveled. Remember what they wore, if they wore anything on their feet at all. And, remember what they must have walked through to get to the host's home, and the lowest servant of the house would come forward and wash their feet.

I fear this notion of servant/discipleship has almost been totally forgotten these days. Many Christians calling themselves disciples are so busy advising and strutting and declaring what everybody else ought to be doing and how they ought to be living. Who's in and who's out? Who's acceptable and who is not? Who's right, and who's wrong. The whole thing is rampant in the church and in the political sphere in America these days. Much good is done by the great variety of Christian service that happens, but there is a terrible tendency for the people of faith to

forget who they are, and whose they are, and they throw themselves into the task of prescribing the way society should act and function according to their view of the faith.

Something in all of that is most assuredly wrong and muddleheaded. It was wrong for the disciples and Jesus saw that as he spoke to them. See, what is going on is a lot like Tom Burnes, who was on a cruise. He shared a dining table with a French man who obviously spoke no English. Since Burnes didn't know any French, they had to enjoy their meals in silence. The only times that they spoke was at the beginning of each meal when the French man would bow and smile to Burnes, and say, "Bon appetite." And, Burnes not very sure how to respond, would bow and smile and say, "Tom Burnes." This had been the pattern of their meals for some days, and until a friend heard of it and took Burnes aside. He told Burnes that "bon appetite" wasn't the Frenchman's name. That it was French for good appetite. He was telling Burnes, to enjoy his meal. Ah, Burnes was ready for the next meal when the Frenchman entered the dining hall, Barnes nodded to him, smiled, and said, "bon appetite" to which the Frenchman replied, "Tom Burnes."

Misunderstandings, you see, are a common part of life. It should be no surprise to us that misunderstandings arose between Jesus and the disciples, on the occasion, just as they arise between us and God's word. Then Jesus does something that absolutely floors the disciples. It is almost impossible for us to understand how shocking his actions and words were. You see childhood as you and I think about it and understand it, is a relatively modern concept. It wasn't thought up until the 19th century that is the 1800s, but an iniquity in Jesus' time, but children were absolutely nonpersons.

To instruct the disciples to receive a child was inconceivable. Do you remember how they were so active trying to prevent children from getting anywhere near Jesus? Rather than accept children, the disciples would send them packing. They were insufficient. Nothing more than a nuisance.

At the time in Rome, and in the Roman Empire, childless couples who had no heirs to inherit their estate, didn't adopt children, they adopted adults. Do you remember the kings and queens of England that when the king died and the next monarch was only a child? The child didn't descend to the throne, a regent; an adult did on behalf of the child. Children themselves couldn't directly inherit anything. Children were very little, or absolutely no account, until they reached puberty. In Jewish tradition, until they had been Bar Mitzvahed or Bat Mitzvahed, and then they became adults. Children in the disciples' time were non persons.

It seems to me then that when we hear the Gospel, we are like the disciples. We are being instructed to reach out to, to receive, to include, to serve, those who are the nonpersons in our society. Just as it was in the disciple's time, so to in ours, it was a mighty tall order. All too often, Christians in the church, are only too quick to identify the nonpersons, and then set out to exclude them from the community of faith. Just the way the Sunday school children treated Obadiah, because he was different, not like them at all. Just an insect. A non animal.

So it is that Jesus instructs the disciples, that these socially invisible children, are not only to be served, but are to be received, and to be included. They had an extraordinary relationship with

him. “Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all,” says Jesus and then he took a little child, and put it among them, and taking it in his arms, he said to him “Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.” The gospel will hammer the point home in the following verses. Have a lot at them when you get home.

There some outsider, someone unknown to the disciples, is reported to be healing people in Jesus’ name, but he is not one of them. This, after they themselves, in our reading this morning, had failed in their attempts to heal someone. And, again Jesus tells them, that such an outsider cannot do them any harm, since he heals in Jesus’ own name.

The disciples are left shaken, and if we grasp it, we too probably are shook with a new understanding of what it means to serve, to be last, yet to be first in the eyes of God, and finally in the kingdom. Such an understanding was virtually inconceivable to this group of male disciples. Now the challenge to do something else in Jesus’ name. To serve, to receive, to include someone as in inconsequential as a nonperson who doesn’t belong, a child. And, that means, doesn’t it beloved, that you and I are called to a radical acceptance of others. To think of and deal with humans, every human being, even the oldest, the most villainous, the most miserable, as one as to who Christ is brother, and God is Father.

In the spring of 1883 two young men graduated from medical school. One, Ben, dreamed of practicing medicine on the East coast. The other, Will, wanted to work in a rural community. Ben begged his friend to go to New York where they could both make a fortune. Will refused. His friend called him stupid and foolish for wanting to practice medicine in the mid-west; nonetheless Will went west and opened a small clinic. Years later, the wealthy and the powerful came and still do, from all over the world to Will and his clinic. Only, we know it as the Mayo Clinic.

Amen.