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Most average people in the U.S. don't think of themselves as having servants. That's because it's so easy to forget about the grocery store clerks and the janitors, not to mention the workers who harvest our strawberries and fill the potholes on our roads. We have lots of servants, but since we don't usually hire them directly, we rarely take note of them the way the lords of Downton Abbey did of Mr. Carson, their butler. But from what we've heard for the past couple of weeks, Jesus thought a fair amount about servants and how he was called to be one.

In today's Gospel story, Jesus made a point of walking the road with just his disciples so that he could have an intimate conversation with them. Knowing their expectations for greatness, he explained for a second time that he was going to be betrayed, killed and then rise to new life. His companions responded with blessed silence. No questions, no sympathy, no protest. Perhaps they were just shaking their heads in hopes that he'd come to his senses when they finally sat down in the shade. Once he was out of hearing distance, they got into a lively discussion of their own.

The scene when they arrived at their destination must have been interesting. When Jesus asked what they had been arguing about along the way, they again took refuge in silence. So once more, Jesus tried to explain himself.

When he had told them that he would be taken by force but would not respond in kind, they were reduced to silence. He tried to explain his reasoning. Everything he did was part of his project of making God's kingdom of justice, peace and well-being present among them. None of it was for his own glory, but rather for the good of everyone concerned. (That is one reason for telling them not to talk about it.) If he had wanted fame and fortune, wouldn't he have been better off catering to the powerful? Instead, the powerful were precisely the ones who were threatened by him and his attention to the outcasts and unnoticed.

Jesus was telling the disciples: "If you want to be great, look to God who has handed creation over to mere human beings. Think about it! Who is most important in society? Do emperors, generals and religious leaders surpass the importance of mothers? Whose role is truly indispensable — not to mention life-giving?"

Jesus' disciples loved him, but they didn't understand him. His way of thinking was just too different. So, when words didn't suffice, he picked up a child to show his argumentative disciples what it looks like to be in first place in the reign of God.

What was he trying to teach them as he put his arms around the child? Perhaps that like the child, they had been chosen not for their importance or even their potential, but because they were loved. Their mission was not to perform mighty works, but to receive the little ones, the needy, the forgotten and the rejected. Their mission was to share the love they had been given so freely. They were called to the humble, humbling service of embracing the little people just as Jesus did.

When Jesus picked up the child, he was performing a living parable, teaching that loving someone is the greatest service you can do them; everything else flows from that and nothing else is very valuable without it. Loving is also the greatest service we can do for the entire world because the more people are loved, the less they need to compete and use violence to make their mark.

Jesus' faith in the mission God gave him was what made him so different from the rest. It made him both incredibly attractive and impossible to understand in a theoretical way. Jesus knew in his bones that love is more powerful than

violence. Thus, no matter how horrific the violence that would be done to him, he knew it would not overcome him. That's why Jesus never spoke of the passion without the resurrection: They were one and interwoven. The resurrection was the final defeat of oppression and violence. It was the victory of the little ones, the victory of the servant.

To get to the resurrection, Jesus had to pass through the shoals of death. He had to trust love to carry him all the way through. It was Jesus' faith and vulnerability that allowed God to raise him. No theory is sufficient. But the word of the Lord is that no practice will fail.

## **WISDOM 2:12, 17-20**

The sage writing the Book of Wisdom is preaching to the choir in today's reading. It is a discourse both we and the choir probably need to hear. Earlier in this chapter, the sage described the materialist philosophy of the wicked. According to the author, the wicked refuse to believe in anything outside of their direct experience. They say: "Brief and troubled is our lifetime; there is not remedy for our dying" (Wisdom 2:1). That outlook leads to a sense of meaninglessness: "When this is quenched, our body will be ashes and our spirit ... poured abroad like empty air" (2:3). Then, because they see no meaning beyond the moment, they conclude: "Let us enjoy the good things that are here. ... and let no springtime blossom pass us by" (2:6-7).

Poetic and sophisticated as they presume to be, the very existence of the righteous questions them beyond their power to ignore. The idea that anyone could be content with a life not based on immediate gratification becomes an affront to them. They can't resist the challenge to prove themselves right by proving believers wrong.

Unfortunately, the most frustrating opponent a high competitor can go up against is someone who doesn't care about winning. The wicked can make the righteous miserable, but that doesn't change their minds. The more miserable they make the innocent, the deeper their own wound from not winning. They can get caught in a frenzy of torture, dehumanizing themselves while still unable to undermine the dignity of their victims.

The problem is that the wicked are trying to win a game the righteous won't play. As James Reese states in his commentary *The Book of Wisdom*, "The ungodly group presumes that the upright must fear death just as they do." But history has shown repeatedly that when a person doesn't fear death, martyrdom offers no threat. The wicked also assume that if God is on the side of the righteous and they victimize them with violent tactics, God will be forced to use the same sort of tactics to defend the innocent. Again, they have misjudged their opponent.

The bitterest pill the unjust must swallow is that what frightens and controls them is impotent over the righteous. That is what the Salvadoran army and government learned when they threatened Blessed Oscar Romero and the people he led. Contrary to what bullies believe, persecution often strengthens resistance as it brings people to understand the truth that Paul expressed in 2 Corinthians: "I am content with weaknesses ... persecutions ... for the sake of Christ, for when I am weak, then I am strong" (12:10).

## **PSALMS 54:3-4, 5, 6, 8**

Today's psalm refrain summarizes the message and hope of this week's readings. The persecutors caricatured in the first reading are clueless about the faith this psalm celebrates. The opening line proclaims the mystery of God's relationship with the chosen ones. When someone praying this psalm calls upon the name of God, she is making a confident proclamation about the God who saves and at the same time, she is imploring God to hear her prayer.

The rest of the psalm could be placed in parallel columns with Jesus' teaching about his upcoming suffering and glory. The second pair of verses explain the impotence of the haughty: Do what they may, their efforts will fail because they have nothing to do with God. The final part of the psalm mirrors Jesus' announcement that he would rise. No matter what might rage against him, God will sustain his life.

## **JAMES 3:16—4:3**

At this point in his epistle, James leaves the arena of social justice to talk about relationship in the community. Although those too have implications for justice, James now addresses the topic differently.

It seems that every human community is prone to the problems James mentions. It all starts when we play a measuring game and evaluate our own worth in the light of another's gifts.

That is a poor idea from the start because we are judging another from our vantage point, a perch which rarely offers insight into another. We may see their success, but not the effort it took to get there or the insecurity they may feel. Perhaps the only people we can evaluate with any degree of correctness are those who are humble enough to admit their own failures, their struggles and the awe they feel at having received God's grace. It is rare that such people incite great envy or jealousy.

James tells us that conflictual behavior springs from ignoring wisdom "from above." Wisdom from above is a gift of God. The chief characteristic of the person who possesses it is an awareness of that fact. The qualities James mentions flow naturally from a person's awareness of the gift of grace.

James says that wisdom from above is pure. By that he means that it includes singleness of heart, purity of intention. The wise person is peaceable and considerate, meaning that she neither flaunts nor hoards what she has. She notices others and responds to them with an awareness of how they can be good for one another. When James says that someone with wisdom from above is compliant, it means that he can listen to another humbly and respectfully enough to allow his own opinion to change in light of what the other says.

Jesus said, "Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy." James implies that the inverse is just as true; wisdom from above assures a person that she has been shown mercy and it disposes her to practice it as well.

James criticizes his community because they have allowed conflict to characterize their communal life. He attributes their problems to their "passions," habits of prioritizing their own pleasure or enjoyment. Their self-centered attitudes have even made their prayer impotent because in asking for their own pleasures, they are seeking something God does not give.

## **MARK 9:30-37**

According to Mark's way of relating the story, Jesus was rather casual when he first told the disciples that he was headed for suffering, death and new life. As we heard in last week's Gospel, he initiated the conversation with the question of who others thought he was and then went on to explain that his vocation was to be God's suffering servant, not a warrior king. This week our Gospel presents his second attempt to help the disciples understand what he was really all about.

Mark tells us that Jesus was traveling in secret, carving out essential time with his disciples, trying to help them comprehend how he understood his vocation. Now he addresses his theme head-on and tells them that the Son of Man will be handed over, be killed, and will rise after three days. Instead of responding with sorrow or even protest, the disciples said nothing.

Mark explains their silence saying, "They were afraid to question him." That phrase reflects the original end of the Gospel (Mark 16:8) when the women who received the message of Jesus' resurrection said nothing to anyone because they were afraid.

Of what were they afraid? Earlier in the Gospel, people responded with fear when Jesus calmed the storm (4:41); when they saw the exorcism of the man who lived among the tombs (5:15); when the woman who was healed by touching his garment came before him (5:33); and when Jesus walked on the water (6:50). In each of those instances, it was Jesus' awesome power that led them to fear. Now it seems that his vulnerability frightened them. In either case, they responded with fear to what they couldn't understand.

When Jesus had told them not to speak, the word of his accomplishments spread quickly. When he talked to them about what was coming or asked them what they had been arguing about, they remained silent. Fear is embarrassing to admit and confession, even though it is more honest, can be much harder than bragging.

The first message Jesus preached in Mark's Gospel was, "This is the time of fulfillment. The kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the gospel." His call to repentance (metanoia) invited them to take on an entirely new mindset, to begin to live as participants in God's reign over creation. Everything that Jesus said and did from that on was a revelation

of God's reign, but it was so different from everyone's experience and expectations that little glimpses of it were often frightening.

Jesus' message that the powers of evil would muster all their strength against him was the most frightening message of all for disciples who hadn't adopted his perspective. Jesus looked at life from the vantage point of the inbreaking of the kingdom of God. He knew it was like yeast: subtly but relentlessly at work in their midst. Even with clear signs that his enemies were about to strike, Jesus believed that darkness could not swallow up light, and evil machinations would prove impotent against the kind of power God wields. So, he lived as if death did not matter.

The disciples, so enthralled with their own ideas about a messiah and their own fears, missed the most important point of what Jesus was saying.

Even today, when we refer to this as a passion prediction, we truncate Jesus and his message. Each time that he was going to suffer, the promise that he would rise was an integral part of the statement. He warned the disciples that it would look like evil won, but he assured them that it wasn't true — it wasn't even possible. Rather than a Passion prediction, we could do better to call this a Resurrection prophecy.

Jesus also knew that the only way his disciples could believe what he taught was if he showed them it was true. No talk had been sufficient. The disciples continually fell back on their customary way of thinking, trying to outdo one another which is simply another expression of violence.

When words were not enough, Jesus decided to shock them with a sign. He picked up a child and said in effect: "You want to be important? Here's what important looks like!"

Which of the disciples had to move over to make room for the new, young star of Jesus' show? In reality he wanted them all to move over — all the way to last place with him. Like the child, he trusted in his Father, and like his Father, he watched out particularly for the little ones.

Jesus was focused on living in God's promised future while his disciples were caught in the milieu of what they considered probable. The only way to really understand what he was saying was to do what he did, to trust in God as he did. One way to start was by learning to be a servant: servants of God and servants of God's little ones.

## **Planning: 25<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time**

**By: Lawrence Mick**

Are there ever any conflicts in your parish? Silly question, isn't it? A humorous adage says, "Two Jews; three opinions." That applies to any gathering of humans, not just Jews. Conflict seems endemic to human interaction, at least at times.

This is not a new problem in the church, as today's readings make clear. The prophet, Wisdom says, is rejected and attacked "because he is obnoxious to us; he sets himself against our doings, reproaches us for transgressions of the law and charges us with violations of our training."

Conflict can even occur among those who seek to lead the parish's worship life. Why is this? In today's epistle, James says, "Where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there is disorder and every foul practice." Can jealousy and selfish ambition creep into our ministries? Think of a lector who gets angry when he or she is not scheduled for a big celebration like Christmas or Easter Vigil. Or of a planner whose ideas are not embraced by the larger group. Or of conflicts between planners and presiders. There are multiple situations that are open to jealousy or personal ambition or hurt feelings that can lead to open conflict among parish ministers.

Again, this is not new in the church. In the Gospel, we see conflict among the disciples of Jesus, a conflict that flows from a desire for status and honor, the wish to be recognized as the "greatest" or most important among the followers of Jesus. Jesus uses the image of a little child to call them to be servants of all.

The difficult aspect of this is that it may not be an indication of base motives or petty desires at all. Conflict can arise simply because two people see things differently, even if both of them are acting out of sincere and selfless motives. They both want the worship of the parish to be as good as possible, but they have different ideas of what that means.

So how do we avoid conflicts and, more importantly, how do we resolve them when they occur (because they will)? Again, the letter of James gives us advice: “But the wisdom from above is first of all pure, then peaceable, gentle, compliant, full of mercy and good fruits, without inconstancy or insincerity.” That’s a tall order and a long list of virtues but underlying them is the fundamental virtue of humility. We who seek to serve the community must constantly nurture humility in our hearts. Humility reminds us that we don’t have all the answers or always the best ideas. Humility assures us that we are not ultimately in charge of the liturgy; God is. So, we can relax a bit when our ideas are not followed and trust God to work through all of us, who are all imperfect instruments of God’s will.

## **Prayers: 25<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time**

By: Sue Robb

### **INTRODUCTION**

Our desires and possessions sometimes keep us from following Christ. As the disciples argue about who is the greatest disciple, Jesus embraces a little child — innocent, powerless and with nothing. Today, let us be open to the ways we try to place ourselves above others and ask for the grace to be like the child Jesus embraces and a faithful servant to all in need.

### **PENITENTIAL ACT**

- Lord Jesus, you were obedient to the One who sent you even unto death: Lord, have mercy.
- Christ Jesus, through your words and works, you show us the way: Christ, have mercy.
- Lord Jesus, you raise up the children and the lowly to be first in your kingdom: Lord, have mercy.

### **PRAYER OF THE FAITHFUL**

**Presider** May the prayers we present be in accord with God’s will and may we unite our hearts with all in need of our prayers and assistance.

**Minister** For the universal church and her leaders; for hearts of humility that respond to the needs of the poor and the outcast; for continued strength to minister to our broken world ... we pray,

- For freedom and peace for all who are tortured physically, emotionally and spiritually; for all who suffer religious and political persecution at the hands of their leaders; for an end to war and conflict ... we pray,
- For humble awareness and sorrow when we are consumed with jealousy and selfish ambition; when we desire to control people and hoard possessions and resources from those in need ... we pray,
- For the protection and safety of children everywhere, especially those who do not have access to food and clean water, medicine or safe living environments; for the aged and the unborn; for the homeless and victims of human trafficking ... we pray,
- For conversion of mind and heart for all who abuse, torture, kill and control others; for all in prison; for all who cannot let go of past hurts ... we pray,
- For peace for all who have died due to violence in our society; for healing in families who have lost children and loved ones due to hate crimes and war; for all our loved ones who have gone before us ... we pray,

**Presider** Loving God, you uphold our lives. May these prayers be not for our glory, but for yours. Open our hearts to work for justice so our world is safe for all. This we ask, through Christ, our Lord. Amen.

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