

Psalm 1
James: 3:13- 4:3
Mark 9: 30-37

“What Were You Arguing About on the Way?”

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Well, I hate to say it, but we have started another presidential election cycle – that is, if you think these cycles actually have a start and an ending. Mostly I try to screen things out: it seems too early to make decisions, even though the media encourages us to start voting, with our loyalties, **right now**. I want to wait until November 2016 to vote, thank you very much, and I would just as soon not hear all the shouting matches, and shoving matches and preening and put-downs. I don't know if it is true, but I read that Donald Trump told the Boston Globe: “I will be the greatest representative of the Christians that they've had in a long time.” And other candidates feel the need to name and defend their “greatest” qualities as well. Apparently, this is convincing stuff – or, at least, what we have come to expect when we turn on the “news.” It is very strange to me: this juxtaposition of our most fundamental civic values of democratic participation...and our desire for gladiator- type entertainment. Something feels broken to me here, but I confess that I do not know how to fix it.

In the letter, or series of discussions, or chunks of good advice that we call “The Letter of James,” the early Christian Church is asked “Those conflicts and disputes among you, where do they come from?” This is a rhetorical question: answered by the asker. The writer answers, “Envy.” Envy is the root of “disorder and wickedness of every kind.” He adds some hyperbole: “You want something and do not have it; so you commit murder.” This is a pretty strong condemnation of a Christian community. They have been offered “wisdom that comes down from above,” which is pure, peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy.” But in their culture, as in ours, fear and envy and selfish ambition eat away at the things that make for peace. It is a perennial human problem. Frederick Buechner in the book Wishful Thinking, defines envy: “Envy is the consuming desire to have everybody else as unsuccessful as you are.” Let's face it: his sets a pretty low bar for human relations.

Jesus asks his disciples in the Gospel of Mark , “What were you arguing about on the way?” Jesus answers his own question more obliquely than the letter to James, with an action. In front of the men who were arguing about who was the greatest, he places a small child. Then he takes the small child in his arms and says, “Welcome the child, and you welcome me, and you welcome God.” So he blows up their argument about who is the greatest. What is really striking about this story is its setting. Just before the argument, Jesus had been explaining what was in store: “He, their beloved friend and teacher, will be betrayed, killed, and then, after 3 days, will rise again.” The disciples couldn't even hear this kind of talk: it blew their minds. They did not understand, and they were so afraid that they could even ask him about it. Instead, they put their hands to their ears, and say “Lalalalala...” and begin a pointless argument about who was the greatest. As though they could imagine a way to be the greatest follower of a dead leader. Talk about inappropriate timing. Maybe they thought they were out of earshot. They at least had the grace to be silently embarrassed when Jesus asked about it.

When we read that Jesus uses a child as a visual aid – a sort of lesson tool to correct his disciples' mindset, we might wonder, "What or who exactly are we supposed to welcome?" The fact is, the change in cultural norms and expectations make it difficult for us to hear Jesus' words as they would have been heard long ago. We have to forget the modern romantic or comic view of childhood and try to imagine a first century parent in the Near East hearing Jesus. What would be in their minds?

First, vulnerability. Less than half the number of babies born would reach adulthood. Children were likely to be the first to die when famine struck or when an epidemic arrived or when a family had to flee war or ethnic cleansing. Then, security. If your child survived, and if you survived into old age, your child would be your only support when you could not earn a living. But until they were adults and could work, children had no real value, no status. A slave could own property, but a child couldn't. So a first century parent would see a child as having a potential, but not an immediate, value. Especially if it were someone else's child.

Centuries later, the theologian Thomas Aquinas gives us some insight into the medieval view, which was not much different. He taught that in a raging fire, a husband was supposed to save his father first, then his mother, then his wife, and last of all his young child. A difficult dilemma, but one that shows the hierarchy of value and duty.

Jesus was flipping all of this on its head when he links the child, himself, and God. Welcome is becoming friends with God. Welcome is not merely receiving others; it is receiving others with gladness or delight, especially in response to a need.

In the church I attended while I was in San Francisco, St. Gregory of Nyssa Episcopal Church, they name one of their core values as "glorifying the stranger." Not tolerating the stranger, or feeling sorry for the stranger, or even welcoming the stranger. Glorifying the stranger, because, they believe, God comes to us as a child and as a stranger. By presenting the issue of welcome in response to the disciples' questions about who would be the greatest, Jesus emphasizes the relationship between welcome and greatness. His message is: If you want to be great, you must celebrate and welcome others the most, especially those who can benefit you the least. This kind of welcome is possible only when we see God in others.

We would do well to think of all this as we greet each other, and greet strangers, and greet children on Sunday mornings. But Jesus did not teach this so that we could feel warm and fuzzy whenever we got together. I think he gave this visual lesson to make us uncomfortable, to make us think more broadly about welcome and compassion.

The conflict in Syria has been raging for 4 years now. It began as protest in response to the arrest and torture of teenagers who wrote revolutionary slogans on a school wall: teenagers, barely out of childhood. It has now driven more than four million people – a sixth of the population – to seek sanctuary in neighboring countries, making it the largest refugee crisis for a quarter of a century, according to the UN. Of course, many of these refugees are children, but when we begin to list numbers, it is easy to blur the faces into statistics. The photos in the news keep them fresh in my mind, though. The picture of a father lifting barbed wire so that his weeping daughter can crawl through comes to my mind – you have seen others. Turkey is now the largest refugee-hosting country in the world, sheltering 1,805,255 Syrians. Lebanon has taken in 1,172,735 Syrian refugees, Jordan 629,128, Iraq 249,726 and Egypt 132,375. About 24,055 Syrians are refugees elsewhere in

north Africa. The latest UN figures do not include the more than 270,000 Syrians applying for asylum in Europe, nor the thousands resettled from the region elsewhere.

Europe faces a huge humanitarian crisis as they wrestle with what it means to offer assistance, and President Obama has said that it is important for the U.S. to “take our share” of Syrian refugees and reinforced his pledge to allow 10,000 more into the country than previously planned in 2016. The challenge for us is to decide whether this is a political issue, an opportunity for wrangling and arguing and conflicts and disputes, or whether we can see it as an opportunity.

Perhaps this moment in our nation’s history is a moment of possibility, of opportunity. This moment invites us to break through and tear down the walls of Islamophobia that have been erected since the attack on the World Trade Center in 2001. Now, the opportunity is for us to see the faces of Syrians and other refugees as people who seek peace, people who long for home, and people who have endured the ravages of civil war, lost children, children of a heavenly Father. And in their faces to see God.

Maybe we are being offered “wisdom from above.” What will we do? Dietrich Bonhoeffer said, “The test of the morality of a society is what it does for its children.” I guess we have to decide whether those Syrian children are, in some ways, our children. A faith community has a unique voice in the troubles of our time, unique stories from Scripture, a unique history of failure and triumph in compassionate living. And, in spite of and because of James’ warning, we have a calling to a certain kind of discourse that is peaceable and full of mercy. We have a calling to reach beyond easy generosity. We have a calling to welcome and celebrate the child and the stranger as we would Christ.

I was speaking earlier about the problem with arguments and disputes. But the flip side of that coin is apathy and inertia. The problem of refugees and immigration is so immense. What could one person or one congregation do? This question could drain us completely...or energize us. Let’s speak and work together on this one.

Our next hymn is entitled “Surely No One Can Be Safer” in our New Century Hymnal. It is a slightly rewritten version of a hymn written in Swedish in the 1850’s by Karolina W. Sandell-Berg, sometimes titled “Children of the Heavenly Father.” The melody is also Swedish – to me it is a folk lullaby. Shortly before writing this hymn, Sandell-Berg and her father were on a boat trip, when he fell overboard and drowned before her eyes. It is thought this tragedy gave birth to the lyrics. Sandell-Berg maintained her faith and commitment to mission through her whole life. This time, as we sing it, I would like you to imagine that you are singing it to a child – your own child, if you wish, or a child at risk, or a Syrian child. Sing for all those who need to feel the friendship and care of God. Amen.