

18 Pentecost, Proper 20, Yr. B
September 23, 2018
James 3:13-4:3, 7-8a; Mark 9:30-37

I had friends visiting last week. They had flown on Southwest Airlines. I don't know if it's still the case, but formerly, Southwest didn't use boarding passes. When they began boarding, the crush at the gate was something to behold as everyone jostled to be among the first to board. I remember one such flight when the flight attendant reminded people that the back of the plane landed at the same time as the front, so any seat would be fine. I think everyone appreciated his humor, but I don't know if it made any difference in the behavior.

I use that example because I think the readings from James and Mark are every bit as relevant today as they were 2000 years ago. Those two readings, and the collect as well, remind us to focus on what matters long-term – the heavenly things, not those earthly things that even now are passing away, including the desire to be first.

We've been reading James for several weeks now. It's part of what's known as wisdom literature – advice on how to live a godly and righteous life. These past weeks, we've heard him exhort us to make the right choices, to endure trials, to avoid partiality and hypocrisy, to remember that God exalts the humble and humbles the proud. Today he's talking specifically about wisdom – that wisdom that comes from above, from God. Without that, he says, we humans will likely opt for selfish ambition and envy and, because of cravings, fall into conflict with one another. Don't chase after earthly wisdom, which is about self-absorption and the acquisition of status and power; all that, James says, leads to bitter envy, selfish ends, boasting and lying. Make the right choice, he's urging, the choice for heavenly wisdom, which is pure, peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, without partiality or hypocrisy.

James is telling his listeners what we heard Jesus telling the disciples in the Mark reading. In that reading, he predicts his passion one more time; when they hear that, the text says, they are silent – you can imagine why

after that rebuke Jesus gave to Peter when Peter objected to Jesus' first prediction of the passion. But as they were walking along toward Capernaum, they must have found their tongues because they were talking and, when they got there, Jesus asks them what they were talking about on the way. And now they're silent again, only this time it's because they are embarrassed that they were arguing among themselves over who was the greatest.

In the text it doesn't sound like Jesus is exasperated. It says that he sat down and called them to him. We should note that this is the position a rabbi took when he wanted to teach – which is what Jesus does here. He teaches them that they have it backwards – that the one who wanted to be first was going to have to be last, was going to have to be, in fact, a servant to all. Note that he's NOT saying they should not have ambition, but that they should be sure that their ambition and their efforts were aimed in the right direction. They should be ambitious to serve rather than to rule.

That sounds pretty backward, doesn't it? But remember Mohammed Ali? To my way of thinking, he was a great example of the "I'M THE GREATEST" philosophy. In fact, he made that boast over and over during his career. One day a sportswriter asked him whether he meant he was the greatest boxer or the greatest human being. He replied that he meant he was the greatest boxer – "I'll go down as the greatest boxer of all time." But then the writer went on: DO YOU THINK THAT 50 YEARS FROM NOW PEOPLE WILL SAY THAT YOU WERE THE GREATEST? Ali responded, "Fifty years from now everybody in this room will be dead. Nobody will remember what a great boxer I was. The only way I will not be forgotten is if I can do something to help and aid my people." That comment echoed some words of George Bernard Shaw:

"This is the true joy of life, being used up for a purpose recognized by yourself as a mighty one...I am of the opinion that my life belongs to others, and as long as I live, it is my privilege to do for them whatever I can. I want to be thoroughly used up when I die, for the harder I work the more I live. Life is no brief candle to me. It is a sort of splendid torch which I have got hold of for a moment, and I want to make it burn as brightly as possible

before handing it on to future generations.” Those are statements of heavenly wisdom, from two widely different sources.

But still, I think this does sound backward to us. It certainly would sound backward to the larger culture. And I think it deserves a deeper look. Why, exactly, does this sound so backward? Why do we humans want to be the first, the greatest?

One way of thinking about this is set out in the work of Rene Girard, a French philosopher who has written extensively about this. His theory is that humans learn by imitating – just watch a baby learning to talk. And while that imitation is a good thing, there’s an underside and that is envy and rivalry. To see this, just watch two 2-year olds in a room full of toys. No matter how many there are they will both want the same one. And they’ll both be pulling on it and shouting IT’S MINE! Girard’s conclusion is that we want what we want because others want and have whatever that is. And that mutual desire feeds on itself, resulting, as James would say, in envy, rivalry and conflict.

I think there are other reasons too. Perhaps one of the most prominent is our view that the world is a place of scarcity and our fear that we have to fight tooth and nail to get what we need and what we want. To be great, we assume, means that we’ll have power and wealth and all the other things that mean that we can influence the world to make things go our way. After all, if I have the power, I can order everything to my advantage.

And that raises another point about wanting to be the greatest. In his book, *The Better Angels of our Nature*, Stephen Pinker argues that violence has declined but that there are still attitudes, inner demons, he calls them, that pull us towards violence. And one of those demons is the desire for dominance. It can be bedevil individuals or nations, causing the most suffering and grief when it occurs on a national level, when nations feel that they aren’t getting what they are entitled to and see the cause as the malevolence of some internal or external foe. He argues that the desire for dominance may make sense in a state of anarchy but has no place in a

world ordered by an international system. It's an idea that belongs to a primitive way of thinking, and no longer serves a constructive purpose.

One more comment on these questions. And this one has to do with humility. We've talked about this before, I think. That humility is often falsely portrayed as an attitude of "poor little me – I'm worthless, I don't have anything to offer, etc." That's not what humility means. Rather it means to be clear-eyed about who we are, not trying to be more than we are, but accepting the gifts we've been given, recognizing them and then using them to God's good purpose. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks writes about these issues of rivalry and being the greatest, and goes all the way back to the story of Cain and Abel. Using the Hebrew, he points out that "Cain" means "to acquire, to possess, to own." This type of human is about power and thinks that what is owned results in power, especially power over others. Abel, on the other hand, is *Hevel* in Hebrew and it's a word that means "breath." Abel represents human mortality – mortality that comes, not from sin, but from the fact that we are finite creatures. All that separates us from the grave is the breath of God within us. Humility is the recognition of our fragility and our dependence on God for our very life. So, just as those two brothers compete, so do the two visions. On the one hand, the will to power, on the other gratitude and the reverence for life. *(Not in God's Name)*

It's clear which Jesus is urging us to accept. And what if Jesus is right? What if we could imagine that greatness wasn't about power and wealth and fame, but instead we measured greatness by how much we share with others, how much we take care of others, how much we love others, how much we serve others? What kind of world would we be living in? Can you imagine if people were competing with one another in deeds of goodness? I think it would be a pretty cool world – maybe even the Kingdom. Amen.