

## **Sermon: September 19, 2021**

### **“Childish Behavior”**

Scripture: James 3:13-4:3, 4:7-8a, Mark 9:30-37

Unlike many of you, I did not grow up going to the same church every Sunday. We went to church, but never the same place for extraordinarily long. We went to different churches, pausing at some for a little while, but we never really settled anywhere when I was a kid. As a result, my biblical education didn't really begin until seminary, but there were moments of learning for me in Sunday school at various churches and, at one or two places, Wednesday night children's studies. Because there was little lasting stability for me in my childhood biblical education, I had many more questions than I did answers. If God is so good, why do some people suffer so much? If God loves everyone, why did my best childhood friend have to die so young? If the Jews are God's chosen people, why do some Christians think they will not go to be with God when they die? Why doesn't God make all this “believing” easier by simply appearing to people? Wouldn't that be so much easier than the tests we're put through? And if God really loves us, why wouldn't God want us all to go to heaven when we pass from this life? Lots of questions.

When I was old enough to really articulate them, I began to ask such questions out loud. This was not a popular approach among those teaching me. They really just wanted me to memorize the Lord's Prayer, the order of the books in the protestant bible, the apostle's creed, selected verses of scripture. Critical thinking was not allowed. Critical thinking got me into trouble—and when one too many teachers got uncomfortable with my questions, I was shushed. So I eventually stopped asking. Asking seemed

like a bad idea. I worried, actually, that I was doing something wrong. I worried that it wasn't all coming easier to me. Why couldn't I just believe the way so many of the other kids in these classes could?

So I swallowed my questions because I didn't like making people uncomfortable and I didn't want them to think I was either stupid or, worse, faithless. But still I wondered, what was I missing? Why didn't I understand the way so many of the other kids seemed to? I was afraid to ask, so I stopped.

How many of you have had big questions you were embarrassed to ask? Or how many of you have had moments when you didn't understand something, but were afraid to ask about it? You don't have to raise your hands, but I'm going to put both of mine up because this has happened to me a LOT and if it's happened to you, I don't want you to feel alone.

Well, as it turns out, we're in good company because in our gospel lesson today, we learn that the disciples didn't understand what Jesus was taking about and were afraid to ask him for clarification. Jesus was for the second time in Mark's telling of it, predicting his death and resurrection. It's easy for us to look back on this and think, how did they not "get" it when he predicted this again? How did they not get it when he predicts it the third time in chapter 10? How do they not "get" it when he goes to his death and rises again? He's literally told them three times and then did what he predicted he would do. They still don't get it. They don't have the benefit of hindsight, they don't have the benefit of thousands of years of Christian history to look back over. They don't have the benefit of having had these gospels, Paul's epistles, and other books of the bible recorded and placed

conveniently in leather-bound books. They don't have the benefit of years of Sunday school and worship services. They only know what they've experienced and, at this point in the story, their experience hadn't quite prepared them for their teacher predicting such things as his own death and then *rising from* that. When we think about it like that, it becomes really clear why they didn't understand. How could they? They did need clarification, they needed more information. But, just like we sometimes do, they felt fearful at the idea of asking him to explain further.

We might ask of what were they afraid? Were they afraid because they knew he was speaking the truth and worried about losing him? Were they afraid because they didn't want to know the future? Were they fearful of being caught up in whatever activity was going to kill him? Would it kill them, too? Were they afraid because they didn't want to be thought stupid or obtuse? Were they afraid because he'd already discussed this once and they thought he might get angry that they still didn't get it? Had they been poor students? I think it may have been some combination of all of those things. Whatever the reason, the text tells us that this particular teaching or comment by Jesus perplexed them so and, at the same time, they were afraid to ask questions about it.

Once they'd arrived at Capernaum and settled in to rest at a house, Jesus asked them what they were arguing about along the way. He had evidently observed some discussions and, though he surely knew, they fell silent because like all of us human beings at one point or other, they were quarreling over something meaningless. In this case, they were divided over the question of who was the greatest. Who among them is the greatest of all time, the GOAT, as the kids like to say these days?

I always laugh when I hear this acronym G.O.A.T. because first of all, in so many cases, we can't really know that. But even when there's ample evidence to suggest someone really is the GOAT, often that's not something we initially claim for ourselves. Perhaps in rare instances it is, and when it is finally claimed by the actual GOAT, themselves, few people can argue. But we aren't talking about athletes or singers or actors or artists, we're talking about Jesus's followers. Who among the disciples is the greatest? Undoubtedly this particular disagreement over who among them was the best is probably the most ridiculous of all GOAT discussions because the very idea of GOAT is quite antithetical to the understanding of God's kingdom we're supposed to come away with. Jesus has taught them that God's kingdom isn't one in which the GOAT is lifted up high, hasn't he? He's already told them that these distinctions, the ones that matter to the world in which they currently live, are rendered moot (or moo, as Joey from the TV Show friends might say--) in the God's coming kingdom.

And so Jesus, knowing what they've been arguing about, decides it's time for another lesson. He sits down, calls them over and proceeds to tell them, "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all." Keep in mind, they felt so embarrassed over their argument they couldn't even tell Jesus that's what they were saying. So when he says this, I imagine them all looking at the ground like, "Oops." And then, to highlight his point, Jesus asks a child to come over to sit with them, and he pulls the child into his arms and says, "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me." Ouch. Jesus has brought a child, considered not a whole person in this world, one who lives really on the margins in this world, someone who would be considered low, and illustrates that this

member of the class of “least of these” is to be treated just as they would treat him. But wait, there’s more! He adds, “and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.” So to welcome a marginalized person, one of the least of these, is to welcome Jesus and to welcome Jesus is to welcome God, godself.

Let me say that again, Jesus is saying that when we welcome the least of these into our community, when we open our arms to marginalized people, when we show hospitality and kindness and generosity to those on the outside, we are welcoming, opening our arms to, showing hospitality and kindness and generosity not just to that person, but to God.

Let’s sit with that for a second. To welcome those thought of as low in society is to welcome the Holy, Almighty, real GOAT, our Triune God.

Anyone can love and welcome friends and family and people we see every day that live lives like ours. But that’s not what we’re called to do—we’re called to welcome the least of these. We’re called to welcome children. Women. People of color. We’re called to welcome gays, lesbians, and transgender people. We’re called to welcome those without homes. Those without means. Those without abilities we have. And, I’m going to say something here that’s probably not going to be popular, but is incredibly important to remember in this time: we are called to welcome the immigrant and the refugee. That’s not a political statement, that’s a Christian duty. It’s our responsibility.

We who call ourselves Christians are called to love others as we love ourselves. To treat others as we want to be treated. And, maybe even more

importantly, we are called *to not treat others as we would not want to be treated.*

There's a reason why Jesus continues time and again to drive home this point about the low being brought high and the high being brought low: he's trying to teach us how to treat those who are "other" among us. He doesn't let these disagreements stand. He could have shaken his head and gone to rest, but he stops what he is doing and sits down to teach them this vital teaching. He sees that they don't get it and shows them that he will tell them as many times as their thick heads need to hear it: when you welcome the least of these, you welcome God. You honor God. You worship God. You love God. If we aren't a people showing hospitality and love and serving those who are farthest from society's GOAT, then we aren't quite getting it right. We aren't quite doing as God has called us to do, as Jesus has taught the disciples time and again. And if we can't do that, then we've got to really rethink what it is we're doing here. We've really got to ask ourselves some tough questions.

Children instinctively get this because they see how their grandparents welcome them. They open their arms to the new kid. They can't wait to welcome new people. We like to chide childish behavior, but I think we could all do with a bit more of it. The lesson I taught the children is the lesson we all need to hear: we should lovingly welcome and serve "the other" in our midst just as lovingly as a grandmother would welcome a grandchild. When we do that, when we become really, truly a people of extravagant welcome, then we can be sure we're being the body of Christ in the world. Then we can be sure we are really following the one we claim to follow. Amen.