

**Gracious God, take our minds and think through them;
take our hands and work through them;
take our hearts and set them on fire.
Amen.**

Last week we had the first of three cycles in the Gospel of Mark where Jesus predicts his suffering and resurrection, the disciples misinterpret him, and then he offers a teaching on discipleship.

Something to note about the Gospel of Mark is that the author repeatedly defines the essence of faith by contrasting it with fear.¹

In chapter 4 we read, *Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?* and in chapter 5 we find, *Do not fear; only believe.*

For Mark, faith is about fortitude, **courage**, chutzpah – and in the face of Jesus' teaching about his suffering and resurrection, well, the disciples are afraid.²

Last week Peter was afraid because he was expecting the Messiah to be a conqueror, not a suffering servant, and so he rebuked Jesus.

This week, after Jesus makes his prediction for this second time, we are told they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him.

¹ Salt* Lectionary Commentary for the Eighteenth Week after Pentecost, www.saltproject.org.

² Salt* Lectionary Commentary for the Eighteenth Week after Pentecost, www.saltproject.org.

I wonder why they were afraid?

Did they not want to appear clueless? Were they spooked after Jesus' powerful rebuke of Peter? Did they know deep down that asking for clarification – gaining understanding – would mean their lives would be turned upside down?

Perhaps it was this growing sense of dread at what would happen if what Jesus said was true – not only what it would mean for him, but for them too. What suffering would they experience? What advantages would they have to give up?

That is clearly on their minds as they travel to Capernaum, arguing amongst themselves about which of them is the greatest – which gets us to the heart of this passage, as today's lesson from Jesus about discipleship is about competing visions of "greatness."

The disciples were gauging greatness by their culture's standards – through the lenses of power and prestige and attaining them. There they were, a group of nobodies, who suddenly found themselves in the inner circle of the one they believe to be THE MESSIAH. They've arrived!

Surely they are now all great – but, some of them are probably even greater than the others, right? And yet, they are afraid to answer when Jesus asks them what they were arguing about.

But Jesus knew. So he sat them down to teach them something different about greatness – *Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.*

Here again he was leading them back to the Messiah he is, the suffering servant as depicted by the Prophet Isaiah, not the conquering hero they want him to be.

And then he did something so completely unexpected, I would have loved to have been a fly on the wall and seen the looks on the disciples faces.

Jesus took a child and put them in the center and said to them, *Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.*

When we read this, it comes across as sweet. That's because we live in a culture that puts a high value and priority on our children. But in the time of Jesus, a child was the lowest on the priority list – someone only of use to serve others.

Even in medieval times, Mediterranean cultures put a low value on children. The great Christian thinker Thomas Aquinas taught that in the case of a raging house fire, a husband was obliged to save his father first, then his mother, next his wife, and last of all his young child.³

So what Jesus said to his friends as he was trying to teach them about discipleship, putting a child in the center, was not sweet and sentimental – it was shocking and provocative.

Greatness, he was showing them, is not about dominating others or climbing the social ladder, it is about living a life of love and generosity and service to all – it's about welcoming those, like this child, who can do nothing for you. When you do this, you are welcoming God into your midst.

Jesus overturned for his friends – and for us – the normative idea of ascending and descending. Discipleship is not about the ascent up the ladder of greatness according to worldly standards, it is a graceful descent into true greatness by being a servant of all.⁴

³ Kathryn Matthews, *Weekly Seeds*, www.ucc.org.

⁴ Salt* Lectionary Commentary for the Eighteenth Week after Pentecost, www.saltproject.org.

That is a scary thing to stake your life on, when everything around you tells you the opposite. But it helps us to make sense of the incarnation and the cross – two of the central events of our faith.

The incarnation, God coming to dwell with us in human form, was a descent into vulnerability for the sake of love. The cross, God suffering humanity at its worst, was about God saving the world through vulnerability and love, not domination.⁵

Domination is weakness masquerading as power that lashes out in violence, while the Good news of God in Christ is courageous vulnerability and self-giving love. **That is what true greatness looks like, when we overcome the fear, to have the faith, to see it clearly.**

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Fear and greatness and discipleship, then, are our themes for this week. I hope you will spend some time thinking and praying about them.

Where do they intersect in your life?

Where do you see true greatness in the world around you?

What questions are you afraid to ask because understanding will lead to your life turning upside down?

How will you strive for your faith to overcome your fear?

Pray for the courage to ask these and all questions which draw you close to the heart of God and lead you to live a life of discipleship.

~ AMEN ~

⁵ Salt* Lectionary Commentary for the Eighteenth Week after Pentecost, www.saltproject.org.