

WHY DO WE DO IT?
Rev. Gary Magarrell September 20, 2009

For the past few weeks, our scripture lessons have been dealing with how we act with others, with God and our need to feel free to proclaim our faith without fear. Jesus through his personal example, his teaching, his parables and his prayers had been the source of the disciples and followers growing awareness of who Jesus was and what he expected of them and those who were to follow after him.

As time passed, the disciples realized that Jesus was very unique among men. They had never seen someone who was so skillful with people and so compelling in his speaking and actions. People were drawn to him by his presence as well as his capacity to teach and to heal.

As the time progressed, the disciples began to worry about where Jesus was heading and were concerned about their own future. They witnessed crowds hanging onto Jesus' every word and deed. But they also saw the authorities, both religious and political, less and less tolerant of Jesus and what he was saying. The religious leaders were scandalized that he made claims for himself and his relationship to God. How dare he do so they would mutter and even said so directly to the face of Jesus. However, to this point, no matter how often they tried to trap Jesus into saying the wrong thing, Jesus was able to get the better of them.

The political leaders worried about the crowds and were nervous Jesus would lead a revolution with his popular appeal and the desire of the Hebrews to throw off the yoke of Rome. They conspired to watch him carefully at all times and received reports of every action Jesus would take.

The disciples witnessed this hardening viewpoint against Jesus and tried to warn him about the dangers he would be facing if he was not more careful. The possibility that Jesus might face death began to haunt the disciples and they were afraid.

This is where we are when we come to the Gospel reading from Mark today. Jesus had just disclosed that indeed his teaching, healing and preaching will most likely lead to his death. In true human fashion, the response from the disciples is predictably denial. As well as their deep and genuine concern for Jesus' safety, Jesus' death would impact their own lives and their hopes and dreams for the future.

We can guess that the disciples were hoping Jesus was headed for greatness, either a return to a place of power in the world, the restoration of Israel to its former glory they had experienced during the reign of King Solomon or at least an offer of freedom from Roman oppression. Perhaps in all this, they dreamed there might be a place at the table of such greatness for them his very loyal followers. You can just imagine that Jesus' prediction of his possible death at the hands of the officials throws all such hope into doubt and leaves the disciples scrambling to reorient themselves to this possibility.

On the road from Capernaum the disciples put some distance from themselves and Jesus. They talk among themselves and the talk turns argumentative. When Jesus turns and asks them what they were fighting about, the text we read says they were silent. Perhaps they were feeling embarrassed by the nature of their conversation.

The text of this episode strikes into our very being. In a world where greatness is measured by power, wealth, status, fame and recognition, we are reminded of Jesus' own vision of greatness in the world. The image of caring for the child as a sign of greatness illustrates for us just what it means to be followers of Jesus. Caring for the most vulnerable and the celebration of all people was his way. Worry for self and our search for personal glory was not his approach.

This word greatness: the disciples had a hard time understanding what Jesus was saying for it appeared to be the opposite of how the world sees greatness. It was not to be a question of who was greater than the other. He or she who would be great must first humble themselves as a servant and serve one another. Mark states that Jesus said to the disciples: "If any one would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all."

We will be celebrating the Lord's Supper on October 4th which is World Wide Communion Sunday. We all know the story of the Last Supper, the bread and the wine and the judgment of Judas for what he was about to do. However, a key event of that night occurred shortly after they all arrived. The doors were locked and Jesus got up from his chair. He took off his outer tunic and tied it around his waist as a towel. Then he took a basin of water and began to wash each disciple's feet.

No doubt the disciples had noticed when they arrived that the customary servant who would usually wash their feet was not there. They were alone. None of them had moved from their place but Jesus had got up. Jesus moved from one to another and washed their feet. How would you have felt if you were at the table with a special person and that person offered to wash your feet? I sense we would all be uncomfortable and yet Jesus did so. Unless you are willing to wash one another's feet in the role of a servant, Jesus said, you have not grasped the message concerning what it means to be great. A Christian is to be one who serves freely, lovingly and without calculation.

The writer James in the reading this morning follows up on this issue of greatness with his question as to who is wise and understanding among us. If we asked this question, what would we say? James is writing to new churches made up of people from all walks of life who were recent converts to Christ. He had noted that relationships between the men who were in the churches were less than stellar. There was much movement as people maneuvered themselves into positions of authority or perceived prominence.

James goes on to answer the question he posed as to who is wise and understanding among you. By a man or woman's good life let him show his works in the meekness of wisdom. In other words, true wisdom is in the person whose life is lived as a good and humble person.

James recognizes that many human beings have bitter jealousies and selfish ambition which gets in the way of the true way of life as shown to us by Jesus Christ. He states that the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, without uncertainty or insincerity. And the harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace. It sounds so ideal and yet it is hard to put into practice.

I titled this sermon “Why Do We Do It?” As we listen to the words of Christ and St. James, as we hear of the actions and attitudes of Jesus, it is hard not to agree with what we hear. Of course we nod, this all makes sense. Then why is it so difficult for us to achieve what we believe makes sense as Jesus our Lord teaches us?

Think of the disciples who lived and travelled with Jesus for three years. In spite of their best intentions, they were caught once again wondering who among them would achieve the best honours and recognition. And so in spite of themselves, they jockeyed for position.

I am not sure how many of you were watching the TV show America Has Talent. It began with nearly 100,000 people applying to show their talents and performing that talent before three judges. They then judge who moves on to the next level or is rejected as a contestant. Finally it is narrowed down to less than 50 contestants. Each week, 10 persons or groups perform. American viewers vote by phone or internet and 5 from each move on to the next level. And so it goes until there are just 10 left. Again America votes.

Not only is the person or group having to perform before millions of viewers, they also have to create a new performance each week along side of those who are their competitors. Needless to say each person or groups’ dream is to achieve recognition, the break they have waited for to realize their dreams and win a million dollars. This year’s final performance came down to two people: first a 45 year old woman singer who performed opera. She had beaten cancer and created a new life as a Mexican-American. The second finalist was an unemployed chicken plucker from Texas who sang western style music. Both had beaten incredible odds in life as well as the odds to be the final two contestants out of 100,000 who tried out to be chosen. In the end the chicken plucker won and the American Dream was shown to be still alive for two wonderful performers whose lives have been forever changed.

What made me speak of this contest was the enormous expectation that each performer or act, in spite of their ambition, determination and dreams, was expected to be graceful in defeat as well as in victory. And they behaved marvelously as far as we could see. Sitting there viewing the people waiting to hear if they were finished or would have another chance, I had nothing but admiration for them and wonder if I could be as gracious before millions when my dreams were about to be achieved or disappointed..

Back to our readings: James was disappointed in the lack of graciousness and understanding he was seeing in the early congregations. He reminded them that we are all in this together and on the same path to find our right relationship with God.

James was trying to illustrate where our push for personal recognition and position leads us. It is counter productive. Remember his words about the ways of mankind:

“What causes wars, and what causes fightings among you? Is it not your passions that are at war in your members? You desire and do not have; so you kill. And you covet and can not obtain; so you fight and wage war.”

Then James goes on with these very interesting words: “You do not have, because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions.”

James knew the struggle early Christians had to recognize that the Christian faith was a life changing faith, not merely words but a way of living. Yes God hears our prayers and our requests but often does not answer for our motives for what we ask are often suspect. When we ask only for ourselves, then we have missed the teachings of Jesus.

So as we look at our church and our life together, what do we ask of God? How would we answer the question – what makes a great church? Is it the place or the spirit that permeates its people searching together for God’s will to be done in our own lives and in the lives of those we love. As in the early years of the church, James calls on us to love one another and develop a safe place for people to come and discover God as known through Jesus the Christ.

Jesus was only too well aware that the disciples were struggling to understand what their task was to be as they had followed Jesus. He knew their human weaknesses and their strengths and loved them for who they were. In spite of the best teacher in the world, these men would forget and find themselves doing things that did not make them proud. Indeed they were ashamed for their weaknesses and inability to be like Jesus.

Yet when Jesus was arrested, tortured, put on trial, crucified unto death and resurrected, it was to this group of men and women followers that he entrusted the message. Go and teach all nations. Tell them what you have seen and experienced. Make my message authentic because in you people will see the power of God to make men and women new.

What a powerful thing this Christian story! God has a role for us each to play in the world. Be not afraid, said Jesus, for I am always with you; where I go you will go also. This day you will walk with me in Paradise.

Ask of me what you want said God and I will listen. I can help you to be more than you believe you can be. I can assist you to find peace and joy and life.