

Proper 20-B
September 22-23
St. John's Cathedral

As I read the gospels, I like to think of the disciples as our teachers, but maybe not in the way most of us would assume. I think sometimes they are the best teachers when they are not at their best – when they simply don't get what Jesus is teaching them – times when they seem incredibly dense.

And today is one of those times. The wonderful thing about the episodes when the disciples are not on their game at all is that they create incredible teaching moments for themselves – and for us. And often that's because we can see ourselves in those sometimes stumbling disciples.

Today we continue in Mark with that pattern of walking and talking as Jesus and the disciples move through Galilee. We hear Jesus predict again that he will be killed and will rise again. But the disciples are silent. Maybe they didn't understand. Maybe they just didn't want to deal with it.

But when they get to Capernaum and into a house, Jesus kind of gets in their faces. What, he asks, were they arguing about among themselves on the road? With this question, they were kind of 'busted.' They had been overheard. And they didn't really have an answer beyond a silence that was perhaps an embarrassed silence.

Finally the truth comes out. They were arguing about which one of them was the greatest.

And that creates the teachable moment. It probably wasn't the first time they heard this, but it was an important time to hear it again. The humility talk. The

humanity talk. A message that gets right to the heart of who Jesus is and what is at the core of his life and teaching.

And I wondered, as I read this, what it sounded like as Jesus spoke. Was it a tone that was kind of impatient – like “How many times do I have to say this?” Or was it lecture-like? Simple and straightforward? Or was it more of a loving and gentle teaching that drew them to his heart as they continued to be formed into a community of followers?

“Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all,” he says. And then puts a child in his arms and challenges them, “Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.

(We need to remember that children occupied a different kind of space in that culture. They were not only young and vulnerable, they also had no status or power or legal rights. They were not cherished in the way that children are cherished today. They were kind of like the least of the least.)

And so to welcome, to embrace the least of the least, is to welcome and embrace not just Jesus, but also God the Father. The point is that we are all called to be servants – those who put the needs of others before our own – particularly those who have little status. And it is also a call to remember that we all stand together on the common ground that is humanity—the ground that we continue to walk with Jesus.

The call to be a servant is a huge piece of teaching that is tucked into all kinds of scriptural places. It might remind us of Jesus washing the feet of his

reluctant disciples in a way that made a similar point. It might remind us of what Paul wrote in Philippians – that Jesus emptied himself and took the form of a servant – even a slave.

Frankly, becoming a servant can be a challenge in any time or in any culture. Who wants to be a servant when the value is to the boss? Who wants to be the least when the value is to be the most – the important one – the greatest one. The disciples aren't so far from us in their struggle to embrace this re-framing of greatness.

I suspect it is a special challenge right now as we are in the middle of an election season, bombarded by the rhetoric of greatness from candidates on every part of the political spectrum. This is how campaigning is done. For a few months it runs in the background of our lives. It sometimes saturates the television lineup. And there will be more to come. Today's gospel offers a sharp contrast to the claim of greatness with the opportunity for humility.

In the larger picture Jesus' teaching is largely a call to humility. Sometimes we think of humility as a kind of groveling or being reduced to less than we are. But that's not what it is. The word humility comes from the same root as soil -- humus. The stuff in our gardens and flower pots.

I like to think that humility is a lot like being 'grounded.' -- being truly ourselves, thankful for life, thankful for having enough without seeking more than we need. Thankful for being able to use our gifts and talents without having to prove we are better than others. Knowing that what we are and what we have comes from God.

Humility helps us put our lives in perspective both in our relationship with God and with others.

Benedictine Sister Joan Chittister calls humility “the glue of relationships,” and a way of making room for God and for others. It is the foundation of family, friendship and love. It helps us understand our place in the universe.

This brief encounter with Jesus and his disciples and this teaching moment about humility and service says a lot about living with the heart of Jesus. Living into our relationships with friends, family and those we don’t know with those core values that grow out of Jesus’ teaching and relationships. Living with an undefended heart – a generous heart – a humble heart.

I think the heart really is a key to this. First we remember that the love we share comes from the love with which Jesus loves us from the depth of his heart. As children we probably sang “Jesus loves me, yes I know. That love enables us to extend our heart to those who lack power in the systems we are accustomed to navigating – those who are like the child Jesus held. Those who lack the resources to move through life without struggle. Those who do not feel cherished. Those who are hungry, or without a home, or in some way just battered by life. Some of us have been in those places; some of our family or friends have been in those places for any number of reasons. It is not an easy place to be.

I served for a while at the church here in Spokane that now is known as the West Central Episcopal Mission – the mission that will hold its Empty Bowls fundraiser here at the Cathedral this coming Friday evening. It was and continues to

be a challenge for folks in that neighborhood because of the level and the volume of need. Sometimes it felt overwhelming.

We could offer a meal or two every week and the mission still does. We could provide Christmas gifts for people who might not get any others. We could help connect people with some of the help they needed. We could offer prayer. For a while we operated a drop-in center that offered a warm place to be in the winter – or a cool place in the summer – a place to do some laundry or take a shower. All of those were helpful and good.

But I think the best thing we could offer was hospitality. Not just the hospitality of a meal or a cup of coffee, or the use of a washer and dryer – but a deeper kind of hospitality. A hospitality that received the stranger, the guest, the neighbor, with dignity and love and respect. A hospitality that reflected the heart of Jesus – that saw Jesus in the stranger or the dinner guest or the person who needed a shower or who had reached rock bottom.

I know that the time I helped out there shaped me and challenged me and touched my heart in many ways. It undoubtedly enriched my prayer life because sometimes prayer was the only thing I could offer.

The call to be a servant belongs to all of us. Jesus provided a teachable moment for the disciples and for us, no matter where and how we discover that call to serve – to offer ourselves for the good of others.

I discovered a Eucharistic prayer this week, part of which has become my prayer framed by this gospel. – A prayer to Jesus: **“Reveal to us the heart of your life and show us how to live the life of your heart.”** May it be so.

