

## Lectionary 25 Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost Year B 2021 September 19, 2021

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

In today's Gospel reading, Jesus and his disciples are traveling secretly, and as they are going, Jesus is teaching them about his betrayal, death, and resurrection. But of course, they don't understand what he's talking about, and are too afraid to ask what he means. This feels like a pretty normal interaction between Jesus and his followers, though. Just last week, we heard about how Peter, after correctly identifying Jesus as the Messiah, completely fails to understand what that means. We even might expect that the disciples are afraid to ask Jesus their questions because they remember how Peter was reprimanded. But we receive further clarity as we continue along in our reading this morning. What are the disciples doing on the road as Jesus is teaching? Are they contemplating the deep mysteries of God's divine love, and how Jesus fits into His Father's plan to save the whole world? No, they're arguing about who among them is the greatest. They have keenly missed the point.

Now that my husband has finished his internship, he is back to substitute teaching. And this story resonated deeply with him in his teaching experience. The disciples are just like middle schoolers: so busy talking and thinking about themselves, that they aren't paying attention to the instruction they're receiving. Then, worst of all, they won't ask questions for understanding because they don't want to look stupid in front of the class.

There's a ton of irony in this gospel reading. Surely, the greatest among the disciples should be able to understand what Jesus is talking about. Yet all of them totally miss the point because of their own arrogance and self-centeredness. Moreover, they are too proud to ask Jesus to help them understand. Just like in substitute teaching, there are regularly kids, and even some parents, for whom pride gets in the way of learning.

There is a saying "Those who know, never learn." And it does a great job of encapsulating the way that pride can stop a person from learning and understanding. When my husband teaches, he likes to give his students riddles to pass the time. But there's always one kid in every class who gives a wrong answer that they are *convinced* is correct. And that student spends their time, not trying to come up with the actual right answer or thinking more deeply about the riddle, but instead trying to explain why their answer is actually the correct one, and why Mason's answer to his own riddle is the wrong one. When they finally get the answer, it's another argument. The student, no matter what grade, always opens with, "Well, if you really think about it..." and tries to explain why their answer is better. It is pride, pure and simple. They're so convinced that they know the answer that they refuse to listen.

Now, it's all fun and games when it comes to riddles in the classroom. But people assuming they already know the answer rather than learning has real consequences for our world. When we allow our pride, our own deep arrogance, to stop us from understanding and learning, we end up with Facebook medical experts during a pandemic. We become so proud of ourselves, so arrogant with our own abilities, that we stop listening to good sense and expertise. We start doing research just so we can find ourselves, our own ideas, and confirmation of the things we already know. We end up surrounded by scammers and frauds who are ready to sell us our own biases, while Jesus is trying to give away the truth for free. Just like the disciples traveling with Jesus, we are so wrapped up in ourselves today that we don't listen to what Jesus is saying. We want our way, and we want to be the greatest, the smartest, the wisest. We want to be better than everyone else around us, and seeing ourselves as the greatest, we want to be treated as we think we deserve.

It's easy to see how our pride takes over, how it could be that we let ourselves get in the way of listening to Jesus. So, Jesus' response, his remedy for us, to be humble. He tells the disciples that if they want to be the greatest, they actually have to be the least—like a child. Children in the time

of Jesus didn't have any social standing. Children were valuable to their parents, but not really understood as being of value to a community. To welcome a child, to show a child respect and genuine love would have been counter-cultural. So, Jesus is telling his disciples that if they want to be the greatest, they must serve even ones such as these.

But what does it mean to truly welcome and serve children? Every church says that kids are welcome in their congregation, but there is a pastor I heard about in seminary who, every week, would preside over communion at an altar that was two feet tall, and he would welcome the children in the congregation to come forward to see what was happening. He did this because, before becoming ordained, he was a kindergarten teacher, and he wanted children in his congregation to see what was going on, and to be able to experience it fully. However we engage in service in our world, we are called to do it with humility, ensuring that we create space to welcome the least and the lost among us.

But even in this admonition to be humble there is a hazard. We could become tempted to turn humility into its own competition, so that we selfishly try to become the humblest person, better than others around us, so we can be sure that we really are the greatest at being humble. The problem is that we are so full of pride, we are so self-centered, that we will rank ourselves and each other based on any scale we can get our hands on, even humility. It's not hard to imagine another story like this one, on another road, and another teaching of Jesus ignored, because this time the disciples are arguing about who is the humblest, and therefore the greatest.

Because the truth is that at the end of the day, the disciples don't understand. They don't understand yet who Jesus is or what his mission here is. They don't understand his predictions of his own betrayal, death, and resurrection either in Caesarea Philippi last week, or on the road this week. They won't understand it in the garden of Gethsemane, or at the foot of the cross, and they still won't understand it when an angel greets them outside of the empty tomb.

And yet, despite all of this, all the pride, the failure to understand, the failure to even listen, salvation comes for the disciples and for us. The good news is that in baptism we are joined with Christ in his death and resurrection, and that doesn't depend on us understanding it. This salvation comes to us, for us, and it begins to inspire in us humility, selflessness, community, and a love of the truth. The way that Jesus takes a child into his arms, accepting that the child might not understand what's going on, is the same way we are taken up into Jesus' arms. Christ's mission is to die and rise to save the whole world. Whether or not we understand, whether or not we're even listening, Christ comes to save us. To save us, especially from our own pride that destroys community.

In the service of Holy Baptism, the newly baptized is marked with the cross of Christ, and sealed by the Holy Spirit, receiving the gifts of the Spirit: "the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord, and the spirit of joy in God's presence now and forever." In baptism, we receive our understanding as a gift from God. We and the disciples cannot understand who Christ is or his mission on our own, but with the Holy Spirit, we begin to see God's great love for us and for the world through Christ's life, death and resurrection.

In the life, death and resurrection of Jesus we are saved. Here, in the waters of baptism and in the bread and the wine, the gifts of understanding, and of true humility come to us. They come to us so that we can join in the holy community of believers across the earth, and together be a part of God's creative and redeeming work in this world. On the cross of Christ, our own pride, arrogance, and self-centeredness are forgiven. And in the empty tomb, we find our understanding. Eventually, even the disciples understand, and they are able to tell everyone the truth about Jesus Christ: that he came to us, for us, to save us, and that on the cross Jesus accomplished just that. Thanks be to God. Amen.