

September 19, 2021

The disciples are arguing, imagine that, they are arguing... They are disagreeing about who was the greatest! Imagine, them saying, “I’m more important than you are! Oh Yeah! We’ll I’m more important than you are, na , na, na, na, na!” “Oh Yeah, Well your mother wears army boots.”

Can you just imagine that conversation? It makes me giggle because it reminds me of Jr. High. Right? Apparently, from their perspective there is a hierarchy of some sort. There is some divine list of all people, descending in order from the greatest to the least...

Those words from our reading in James, ring in my ear. “You want something and do not have it; so you commit murder.” And so it goes, for us human beings, constantly, endlessly wanting and wanting some more, and being rivals with each other and in conflict and disagreement.

The older I get the more I see covetousness as the root of all evil...

I like to think that the work of religion has to do with opening our eyes to the ever-deeper truth of who we are, and in relationship to whose we are... It’s the spiritual work of integration, transformation and healing through relationship with God and one another.

Quick story... Michele Norris, good Minnesotan and the first African American radio host for NPR, wrote a memoir of her family called *The Grace of Silence*. Her father had passed away, and she went to Birmingham Alabama to learn about her father’s life when he was growing up. She interviewed his old friends and neighbors, and frankly she was shocked about what she learned...

Well, she knew her father was a proud World War II vet. But she learned that shortly after he had returned from the war, he had been invited to an event honoring World War II veterans. This was still during a time of segregation. Well, he was proudly dressed in his military uniform and quite naturally jumped onto an elevator to reach the event.

Well, a scuffle broke, a police officer pulled his gun and shot him in the leg.

Unfortunately, elevators were for whites only. Now, Michele had never known any of this when she was growing up. Shortly after that incident the family moved to Minnesota.

Michele titled her book, *The Grace of Silence*, because she interpreted her father's refusal to talk about his experiences in the south, as a way of not perpetuating the violence. Trying to heal the hatred and violence by letting it end with himself...

After she learned about her father being shot, she reflected on a story of being in High School and listening to a song called Sweet Home Alabama-- she liked the song. But when her father heard it, he burst into her room in a complete frenzy, and destroyed the record, he didn't break it, he destroyed it. She had never seen him like that before, she couldn't understand why he did that...

It was eye opening for her to realize that her father had grown up with segregation.

This hierarchical argument, who is the greatest, manifests itself in so many destructive ways. We've talked about segregation, but we could also talk about Lutherans and Catholics, Republicans and Democrats, and Vikings and Packers for that matter!

Our reading from James is right, it's all about wants and desires and violence...

The disciples are arguing with one another about who is the greatest, and Jesus picks up a child and holds it among them. And says, "whoever welcomes one such child in my

name, welcomes me.” Can you picture this grouping of people?

I like to think of them standing in a circle, and it is the child, who probably knows nothing about what Jesus is talking about, and it is the child that is at the center of the Kingdom. It’s not about being the greatest, it’s not about whether you deserve it-- it’s all simply about welcoming, inclusion and love.

Imagine that circle being the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, a triangle of people, and then image the child being you... Then imagine that child being all of us... We are all children of God...

The Kingdom of Humanity is good at judging, finger pointing, accusing, casting out, violence... Whereas the Kingdom of God is about welcoming in, belonging, inclusion, love, mercy and forgiveness. Can you see the difference?

Hear again these words from the epistle of James “the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy.”

The good news today is that we are that little child, all of us, each of us is held in the embrace of Jesus. We are all loved and cherished... God is working miracles in our hearts every day.

And as God has welcomed us, we in turn reach out to welcome others. We welcome children... Those who are hungry... Those who are poor... Those who are different, Democrats and Republicans, because in God’s eyes, All Are Welcome... No more reason to argue about who is the greatest, because frankly, we all are...

Amen.