

Epworth Chapel on the Green
September 23, 2012
Pentecost 17
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

Isaiah 49:1-7
Psalm 54
James 3:16-4:6
Mark 9:30-37

We find ourselves today in a pivotal portion of Mark's Gospel, where Jesus is explaining to his disciples for the second of three times that he is going to go to Jerusalem where he will suffer and be killed and will rise again. And as we've seen several times in this Gospel, the disciples are simply unable to comprehend fully what Jesus has been telling them.

In the case of our text today, the disciples are struggling to understand Jesus because they have been arguing among themselves about which one of them is the greatest disciple. As they arrive in Capernaum, Jesus asks them, "what were you discussing along the road?"

And the silence is deafening.

At this point we must bring our epistle lesson into the conversation, because the very things James discusses are what plague the disciples in our Gospel text. They are "full" of themselves. They have caught the jealousy bug. They have contracted the selfish ambition virus. They are caught up in posturing and

maneuvering. They do not possess nor embody God's wisdom, the wisdom that James says "comes from above."

James says, "if you really want to be wise, then demonstrate your wisdom by living a life of good deeds. Learn to put the needs of others ahead of your own wants and desires. For when you are always looking out for No. 1 and living out of your own selfish ambition, then you're going to have all kinds of trouble. That is the world's so-called wisdom. It's not God's wisdom."

"God's wisdom," says James, "is pure; it is peace-loving, gentle, and willing to yield to others. It is full of mercy and good deeds. It is impartial and sincere."

The disciples, in their arguing about which of them was the greatest, are in their own little world, and much of what Jesus is telling them just doesn't get through.

These episodes in Mark's Gospel raise another important question: *Did Jesus ever feel like he failed?*

Did Jesus ever share the feelings spoken of in Isaiah 49? Remember what the writer says there? He says: "my work all seems so useless! I have spent my strength for nothing and to no purpose at all" (v. 4).

When you think about Jesus' ministry and the disciples slowness to learn and understand what he tried to teach them, it makes you wonder. When you consider their selfish attitudes, you stop and think: Did Jesus ever feel like Isaiah's

suffering servant, who said, “I have spent my strength for nothing and to no purpose at all?”

We so often think of Jesus as the divine Son of God that we can lose sight of his complete humanity. I can't help thinking that at some point Jesus put his hands over his face and said, “these guys just don't get it; they're never going to get it, and I'm just bashing my head against a brick wall. I'm laying down my life, and these guys don't get it.”

It is interesting to speculate about this, but in the end it's not productive, because we cannot get into his head and know how he was feeling.

But we do know this -- whatever his feelings, Jesus did not let them prevent him from doing what needed to be done. He traveled to Jerusalem to embrace the Cross and the will of God for him and for the world. He may have *felt* like Isaiah's servant, but he also *did what the servant did*, which was to leave it all in God's hands and to trust God for his reward.

After repeated attempts to teach the disciples who he *really* was were met with their lack of understanding, Jesus probably *was* frustrated. But he is also probably frustrated with me at times when I'm slow to learn the lessons that he is trying to teach me.

Yet Jesus did not give up on his disciples, and he does not give up on us, either.

You and I may also at times be faced with a similar conflict as that of Jesus. We may be faced with a choice between what our feelings tell us and between the course of action God has laid before us.

There may be times when we feel that our contribution to the Church and the world is meaningless; that our efforts are powerless to do good or to effect real change in people's lives. We can be tempted toward cynicism, or even despair.

If you have ever been at that place, or are there now, let me share some Good News with you today. In those times when we wonder whether our efforts count for anything, God has a way of coming to us and giving us grace. When you are frustrated and discouraged, God will bear you up.

When you are tempted to think that your labors are in vain, God will send you the encouragement of the Holy Spirit.

When you feel like no one cares or notices, God will strengthen you to do what is right even if you do not feel like it.

When you feel like what you're doing is an exercise in futility, God will send someone or something into your life to remind you that all is not lost, and that what you do really matters.

In those times when you question whether your life and labor is in vain, God will give you grace to leave your life, your work, your ministry, in God's hands, *and to trust that even if the whole world never notices, God does!*

This is true wisdom indeed. This is the wisdom from above. This is the wisdom James talks about. And notice what James says: “those who are peacemakers will plant seeds of peace and reap of harvest of goodness.”

When we embody the wisdom James speaks of, then *wisdom embodied becomes righteousness extended* in the world. We realize then that our lives really do matter, and we really do make a difference.

As we come to the Lord’s Table, we are reminded that any good we do in the world is done entirely by God’s grace, and solely for his glory.

As you come this morning, bring your life, your love, your labor, and yourself once again to God, and place the outcome of your life in God’s hands.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.