

Sermon: Welcoming the Child

New North Church, Hingham

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Based on **James 3:13-4:3, 7-8a; Mark 9:30-37**

Compared to Paul's writings, said Martin Luther, James wrote 'an epistle of straw,' or, more literally, 'a right strawy epistle.'¹ Luther didn't think much of James' writing, thinking it was totally disorganized and merely borrowed sayings from the other apostles. He may not have appreciated James' stance on faith v. works either.

At any rate, what we have is an interesting letter written by Jesus' brother, and one which calls us to live our lives with single-minded devotion to God.

However, last week, as Tom pointed out, we haven't come close to building God's Kingdom here on earth, despite having access to God through the Bible, through our faith, and through our lived experience. Looking at the current state of the world, we can easily see that not all people have read James' letter or Mark's Gospel. Or, for those that have, the lessons haven't necessarily taken root.

Today, Jesus predicts, for the second time, that the Son of Man will be taken and killed, only to rise again after three days. It's a pattern in Mark: Jesus predicts; the disciples mis-understand; then Jesus provides clarifying instruction. Last week, the disciples were shocked by this prediction, and Peter rebuked Jesus because of it. This week not only do the disciples mis-understand – *again* – but they were afraid to even ask Jesus what he meant. Maybe they were gun-shy after hearing Jesus rebuke Peter the first time, or maybe they just didn't want to know.

And that's it. Then they went to Capernaum, in Galilee.

Now, in Capernaum is 'the house,' and they all went to it. Tradition says that this was Jesus' own home, or it may have belonged to one of the disciples.

Jesus noticed that the disciples had been arguing about something and when he asked about it, the disciples were again silent, this time perhaps out of shame, because Mark tells us that they had been arguing about who among them was the greatest.

Jesus said, 'Come here,' and then he taught them about what it means to be first.

In his letter, James warns about bitter envy and selfish ambition; these things breed disorder and wickedness, he wrote. He wanted to know, where do these conflicts and disputes come from? Because they don't come from God.

In Luke's Gospel, we read that 'for everyone who asks receives' (Luke 11:10). This has been a sticky wicket for anyone who ever asked God for a new job or a million dollars and didn't get them. But James says that when you ask but do *not* receive, look at your motives; maybe you ask wrongly.

Jesus had detected a problem among the disciples. They were avoiding the part about the Son of Man being handed over – by one their own – and killed and seemed only to be focused on their own hierarchy within the Twelve. So, Jesus taught them a lesson.

In 'the house,' apparently lived some families, probably the disciples' own. At least one child lived there, and Jesus singled 'it' out to make his point.

Life in first-century Palestine – Galilee, Samaria, Judea, the Decapolis – was competitive, hierarchical, and very much built around honor, status, and rank.

In the social structure of the time, children were at the bottom. By occupation, shepherds were the lowest of the low, but socially, children were the lowest. No one would take advice from a child, or even carry on a conversation with one. If a child wanted to rise in rank, 'it' would have to simply grow up and go from there.

Later, Jesus would bless the little children, but here he used a child merely as an example, and that was, when you welcome the lowest in society in Jesus' name, you are welcoming Jesus as well, and whoever welcomes Jesus welcomes God the Father too.

This teaching is in line with how one king receives the ambassador of another: protocol said that ambassadors were to be treated as if their king were also present. Jesus is challenging (and flipping on its head) society's assumptions about rank and status. In chapter 10, after another controversy about honor and glory, Jesus gives the disciples a dig when he says, 'You know that among the Gentiles their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants. But it is not so among you...' (Mark 10:42-43). In fact, it might have been. As for Jesus, there is no hierarchy; all are equal in God's eyes.

Way back when, when I was but a lad, a young boxer named Cassius Marcellus Clay declared that he was *the greatest*. He had just defeated Sonny Liston, a fearsome opponent by any measure, and Cassius was on top of the world.

Within weeks, Clay had converted to Islam and changed his name to Muhammad Ali, two moves that generated a lot of controversy. “Cassius Clay is a slave name,” he said. “I didn’t choose it and I don’t want it. I am Muhammad Ali, a free name — it means beloved of God, and I insist people use it when people speak to me.”²

Fair enough. It made little difference to me or to anyone else. But as it turns out, Ali’s father—Cassius Marcellus Clay, Sr.—was named after a Kentucky slave owner turned abolitionist. So, it wasn’t a slave name after all.

The original Cassius Marcellus Clay was the son of a Revolutionary War veteran who happened to own slaves. Cassius was influenced by the speeches of people like William Lloyd Garrison, which turned him toward emancipation and politics. According to *Time* magazine, Clay was a founding member of the Republican Party and helped elect Abraham Lincoln in 1860. The two didn’t see eye to eye on the subject of emancipation, with Clay thinking that the president moved too slowly to ‘lay aside a sickly prejudice.’

Arica Coleman, who wrote the *Time* piece, said, ‘There are other parallels between the abolitionist and the boxing heavyweight champion of the world that make Ali’s rejection of that name all the more appropriate. After all, self-naming is one of the pillars of self-liberation. Cassius Clay was the name of an emancipator, and Muhammad Ali was the name of a free man.’

When do we start to understand what the disciples didn’t seem to want to know? If the Son of Man and his brother can’t get our attention; if their teachings aren’t enough to wake us up to how God wants us to live in peace and prosperity for all, then what hope is there for any of us? Cassius Clay and Muhammad Ali were separated by 100 years, but I think they would recognize each other by their actions and beliefs.

Western attitudes toward children have shifted over the last two thousand years. On their web site, Child Fund International, which is one of our outreach ministries, says that they ‘promote societies whose individuals and institutions participate in valuing, protecting and advancing the worth and rights of children.’

Still, today, worldwide, 570 million children live in extreme poverty. Every day, children suffer from violence, exploitation, neglect and abuse, with those in the world’s poorest communities being especially vulnerable. For example, children in Côte d’Ivoire

engage in the worst forms of child labor, including in the harvesting of cocoa and coffee, sometimes as a result of human trafficking.³

We believe that all children — including those 570 million — have the right to grow up healthy and strong. And it's getting better. In the Ivory Coast, change is being led by the country's First Lady, Dominique Folloroux-Ouattara, the appointed head of the National Oversight Committee of Actions Against Child Trafficking, Exploitation and Labor – she has her own Wikipedia page.⁴ Last October, she hosted a 'Conference of First Ladies' which brought together other First Ladies from 14 African countries to pledge support to their governments' efforts to 'prevent child labor, support victims, enhance regional cooperation, and mobilize resources,' often working with UNICEF. And as we might have expected, when all those First Ladies got back to their husbands with their pledges and findings and reports, things were bound to change. One gets the feeling that only women could provide the push to get stuff done for their children.

From our perspective, we know how the story ends for Jesus and the disciples. If we accept Jesus' teachings about the Son of Man, and begin to live as Jesus called his disciples to live, then what do we bring to the community table that only we can provide? Would we allow anything to get in our way of providing it?

In our society today, the contrast between Wisdom from above and wisdom from below is quite sharp. Verse eight in James' letter says we should 'draw near to God, and he will draw near to you.' The prophets Zechariah and Malachi both wrote that God said, 'Therefore say to them, Return to me, and I will return to you, says the Lord of hosts. But you say, *'How shall we return?'* (Zechariah 1:3; Malachi 3:7)

Look for Jesus and his Father in the most apparently insignificant people. Society's arbitrary rules about rank and status have no place in God's Kingdom. But those who submit to God's will and purpose, and who take a stand against evil, do.

Amen.

¹ *Luther's Works* (St. Louis, MO: Concordia, 1972), 35:362.

² <http://time.com/4363225/original-cassius-clay-muhammad-ali/>, accessed 21 September 2018.

³ <https://www.dol.gov/agencies/ilab/resources/reports/child-labor/c%C3%B4te-d'Ivoire>, accessed 22 September 2018.

⁴ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dominique_Ouattara, accessed 22 September 2018.