

## Pastor Colleen's Sermon of September 20, 2009

**Grace, Peace and Mercy be to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen**

Do you remember a time when you were in school  
and while the teacher was speaking a friend leaned over and whispered something to you...  
And then you whispered something back...  
And then all of the sudden the teacher stops what she is saying and asks if what you are talking  
about is so important you have to talk about it while she's talking maybe you would want to  
share it with the class?

Not that this has ever happened to me personally...  
I have just been a witness to this...

But think about that moment when the teacher snaps you back to attention...  
at that moment when you or someone else was caught "talking out of turn"  
There is just this eerie silence...  
There are those few seconds where you realize  
First, I've been caught talking and I'm in trouble  
And second, NO I don't want to share what I was talking about.  
And you turn three shades of purple, stare back at the teacher, and say,  
"ah... no it's not important."  
And the teacher just shakes their head, disappointingly,  
And goes on with the lesson.

Well in today's gospel story we have a similar moment  
Jesus is traveling with his disciples and he is telling them what his future will look like.  
And just like the lesson we heard last week,  
Jesus is telling them that the Son of Man is going to suffer, die and rise again.  
And the disciples are confused  
They don't understand  
As a matter of fact they are so confused they don't even ask him what he is talking about.  
They don't even try and understand  
No, instead they start arguing.

And again... the teacher calls on them for "talking out of turn."  
Jesus asks, "What were you arguing about on the way?"  
And the text says, "they were silent."  
In Eugene Paterson's translation of this passage in the Message  
it says the silence was deafening.

Yes, I imagine the silence was deafening.  
Think about this moment.  
The disciples have been traveling with Jesus for some time now,  
They've watched him perform all sorts of miracles  
They've even heard their fellow disciple Peter confess that Jesus is the Messiah.  
And instead of just being quiet, watching, and learning...

This group of misfits is arguing about which one of them is the greatest!!  
 So when Jesus asks what they are talking about  
 I can only imagine that the silence was not only deafening but the faces of every one of those  
 disciples was 14 shades of purple from embarrassment for being caught arguing.

But perhaps I shouldn't be quick to label these disciples as misfits.  
 Because if Jesus confronted any one of us and asked us what we have been talking about  
 And fretting about in our own lives...  
 I'm pretty sure we too would fall silent.  
 If we were asked to explain to Jesus how what we are doing and saying  
 measures up with the way of life that Jesus sets before us...  
 I'm thinking we would just sit in deafening silence as well.

You see, the disciples are interested in who is the greatest.  
 They're interested in position.  
 They're interested in how the order is established.  
 They're interested in getting "ahead."

And we are not any different.  
 We too can be pulled into one of these,  
 "my team is better than your team... my idea is bigger than yours.... My way is right and yours  
 is wrong," kind of discussions...  
 And when we are in the middle of a "who is the greatest" type of discussion  
 who wants to be called out to see things from a larger perspective?  
 Especially when they're right in the middle of the game?  
 Who wants to give up their point when you think you are so close to winning?

After expending all that energy in one of these "I'm better than you," arguments  
 When we are snapped to attention the silence is often deafening.  
 And for the disciples this is exactly where Jesus meets them.  
 Jesus' question pulls them into that silence.  
 With his words everything that they had been invested in falls away.  
 And suddenly they are speechless.

And following this deafening, awkward, embarrassing silence  
 I am completely in awe of what Jesus does next.

He doesn't reprimand them.  
 Unlike the school teacher, he does not shake his head disapprovingly...  
 He doesn't pull them down a few pegs  
 He doesn't even roll his eyes.

Instead, he simply sits down  
 (which by the way was always an indication that what Jesus had to say was very important)

He sits down and shows them, gently but firmly,

how they must learn to redefine greatness,  
 he teaches them how radically they must realign their concept of success and achievement,  
 he explains how totally they must rid themselves of their worldly ideas of class.

And right here in this moment is the Jesus we know and love.  
 The one who never stops teaching  
 The one who always meets us right where we are to show us where we are not.

Instead of glorying in his leadership,  
 Instead of assuming sweeping authority and flexing his messianic muscles,  
 Jesus praises and lifts up servant hood and insists that,  
 "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all."

Jesus once again turns upside down everything the disciples thought about what making it means,  
 He turns on its head everything first-century and 21st century people have been taught about what being truly successful and great looks like.

Jesus is pretty clear here.  
 No long tirades and stinging reprimands to the disciples  
 Nope it's pretty simple in God's kingdom...

### **Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all**

And when Jesus said to be a servant to all he really meant ALL.  
 As a matter of fact, so no one would miss it,  
 In order to demonstrate what ALL meant he swept onto his lap a child  
 and instructed his proud disciples to welcome and to be a servant to society's leftovers and left-behinds like children  
 the most powerless, prestige-less, wholly insignificant members of society.

A child in our culture is deeply valued and put first in our priorities  
 However, in the time of Jesus, a child was lowest on the priority list.

Once again Jesus is presenting the disciples with a paradox,  
 This is one more boat-rocking,  
 one more radical up-ending of the way they think things ought to be.  
 First, Jesus tells them that if they want to gain their life, they should lose it.  
 Now, when they want to find their way to the top,  
 to claim greatness,  
 he's telling them to lay claim instead to the last and lowest place.  
 And to illustrate his point, he takes a child in his arms and tells them that when they welcome this little one,  
 they welcome him, and they even welcome the One who sent him.

This latest command makes no sense in the world of the disciples.

Welcome someone who doesn't have the power or ability or place to welcome us in turn?  
 Welcome someone without any expectation of getting anything back?  
 First, the Messiah talks about suffering and dying instead of victory and glory,  
 and now we have to welcome and even value small, insignificant, powerless people?

But Jesus' teaching is clear  
 Jesus breaks the deafening silence by showing the disciples,  
 And all of us,  
 That the ways of God are always turning upside down the ways of the world.  
 In God's kingdom the last are first  
 In this new community the least of humankind would count.  
 And the least would not only count, they would be embraced.  
 Actually, they wouldn't just be embraced; they would be served.

Jesus reached out and swept up a child into his lap to visually demonstrate who the least were.  
 Which is brilliant, because as far as I know,  
 Children think about the things they like doing,  
 and they order their worlds around those things.  
 But adults feel those pressures to be "great",  
 and work and work and work to that end.  
 We roll out the red carpet for those who are like us,  
 the ones who have accomplished things similar to what we have accomplished.  
 But when was the last time you rolled out the proverbial red carpet for a homeless person,  
 or someone who had done jail time,  
 or that teenager who checks you out in the grocery line?

What Jesus is getting at when he tells folks to welcome the child is in essence,  
 "Get off your high horse—  
 And adjust your values  
 because this child is as precious in my sight as you are.  
 This child, who doesn't "add" to society,  
 who hasn't yet earned his way is beloved.  
 Treat him as royally as you would treat me."

The road to Jerusalem is a long one, and there will be plenty of time for more lessons.  
 For us, too, the way of discipleship is long and much is expected of us,  
 and we too would rather think and talk about our reward than the price that will be exacted.  
 Jesus laid down his life for us,  
 And we are asked to lay down our concepts of honor, power, place and prestige..  
 And instead offer our lives,  
 our priorities, our gifts, and our very selves,  
 in order to serve All.  
 May we learn to welcome and honor All in our lives, our homes, our church, and our  
 communities.  
 May we learn to extend the embrace of Christ to All  
 And may we recognize and feel this embrace in our own lives as well.

Amen

**May the peace of God which passes all human understanding, keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen**