

Little Ones

This week and next week, we are going to deal with some passages that indicate a rather serious difference between what Jesus wants us (his disciples) to be about, and what we want to be about if left to our own devices. It starts with Jesus talking rather morbidly about his own betrayal, death and resurrection. The disciples do not understand and they are afraid to ask him about it. Admittedly, the whole thing does sound kind of spooky in a world where death is pretty much the end of the road. They had hitched their wagons to Jesus, and now he's talking about something that can only come across to them as a catastrophe. Seriously, put yourselves in their shoes, you have left everything to follow this teacher around. He does miracles and he tells these neat little stories that mostly leave you scratching your head about something or other, but the miracles really prove that he's something special in most people's mind. Crowds are following him, and everything tells you that his star is rising, and here you are, in the inner circle of something that may be world changing, and possibly even divine, of course your hopes are going to start creeping higher.

Then he starts talking about dying, and that scares you. He also tells you that resurrection is a thing, but you can barely wrap your mind around that, that sounds like sorcery or mythology. What do you do? Why of course you start arguing about who's going to sit where with the other people in the same boat as you. Which one of you is going to be the greatest when all of this finally gets sorted? This is one of the most revealing and frankly predictable moments in the journey of discipleship: when you get delusions that somehow this is going to lead to glory. This is the oldest human sin in the book: ignoring what God says and does, and making decisions based on what you want.

A few prominent examples: God says don't eat the fruit of that tree, Adam and Eve eat the fruit of that tree. God promises Abraham a son by Sara, a legitimate heir to the covenant, but Abraham and Sara are already old, so they decide to do things their own way and the whole Hagar/Ishmael drama ensues. God sends Moses to lead the Israelite out of Egypt and they do nothing but complain about the food, and are too afraid to go where God is sending them, so they have to spend 40 years wandering around in the desert and Moses doesn't even get to actually go with the people into the promised land. In said promised land the people aren't happy with the Lord their God, they would rather have a nice normal earthly king, like the kind with armies and such, so they get Saul, who goes crazy, and David who starts well but eventually becomes an adulterer and murderer, and Solomon, who despite his wisdom, doesn't see that marrying a bunch of pagan queens isn't probably that wise of a move. You get the picture. The stories of the Bible provide plenty of examples of God trying to show people grace and abundance, and people choosing something else.

This week Richard Rohr has been going on about the ancient understanding of union with God, and how the church over the centuries has gotten itself fairly far away from a pretty central point of the Gospel. As with much of what the good Friar says, I have to agree, and I think that perhaps he's even being too kind. The disciples arguing about who is the greatest is just one form of an argument that entirely misses the point. They had some vision or other of what it was going to be like when Jesus finally stopped messing around with all these parables and small time healings, and became the "real" messiah. When Jesus would insist that, in fact, the parables and healings were really all there was and that the time for them was going to draw to a violent end, they assumed that he meant a glorious eruption of the Kingdom of God, not death on a cross. They could not imagine how God's grace could work in the way that it was going to actually play out.

The church has, over the centuries, turned the cross into something of a doctrinal mess in a rather vain attempt to make some sort of sense out of it. Atonement, healing a bad relationship tainted with sin, became the thing in the western church rather than the union of God with humanity. The eastern church held on to the works of the patristics and the desert mystics, who taught that union with God is salvation and separation from God is death. Jesus conquered death because he was “one with the Father,” resurrection is not a miracle (a fluke in the natural system), it is part of the creation, an intended design. At some point, enough time passed that both roads led to a dead zone, where union with God, in life and death, stopped being the sought after goal, and we figured that we would just all be with God in Heaven.

That leads to the same mistake that Jesus corrected in his disciples: putting future glory in place of inheriting the Kingdom. How do you inherit the Kingdom? You humble yourself, you become a servant, you notice the little ones, and you seek their good. This is very hard for us to wrap our minds around, because, left to our own devices, we work the opposite way. We seek our own good, we admire those who are mighty, strong, talented and powerful, we seek to be served rather than serve, and honestly we don't really grapple much with humility other than trying to be a “good sport.” That God would actually work from the bottom up seems backward to us, and we easily buy into “powerful” solutions that work from the top down. Honestly, I don't think any branch of Christianity has held on to this idea completely, we have just had different arguments about who is going to be the greatest.

It's puzzling, because almost everyone who even knows anything about the Gospel will probably be able to tell you that Jesus said, “the last shall be first and the first shall be last,” and maybe remember one of the accounts of Jesus welcoming the little ones, it's certainly not an obscure part of his teaching. Perhaps one problem we have is a sort of psychological catch 22, if we feel loved that tends to boost our ego, and when we accept Christ, we should feel loved, as our ego grows strong our ability to humbly accept God's Spirit is threatened. On the other hand if we feel like abject sinners, we know our need for God, but we can also live in some amount of fear of God's judgment, unwilling to surrender ourselves completely to a God we may not fully trust.

On the one hand, an angry and wrathful God makes a lot of sense to us when we look at the evil that takes place under the sun. The idea that God's grace, mercy and steadfast love could really redeem all of that seems unlikely and even impossible to some. On the other hand, you can certainly allow your ego to swell to the point where you honestly believe that God does not actually require repentance and humility at all, and you are unwilling to lose your life (lay aside your ego) for the sake of the Gospel, you cannot see the point in taking up the cross and following on the way of Christ. So it is that many people who call themselves Christians would rather not deal with the full implications of the Gospel.

The only way that you are going to be able to live on that way is by the grace of God and the Spirit present in you is the solution to the dilemma. If you live with an awareness of God's Spirit in you then you will understand that love can overcome your weakness. If you see that your own fallen condition does not chase God out of your life, but invites his grace. If you understand that to follow Jesus is never to simply stay where you are, and it is certainly not about taking the easy, comfortable path, but rather to trust in God with all your heart and let that relationship change you. You can't do this on your own, you will never be able to walk the right balance, the Spirit must work in you, and to let the Spirit do her work you must let go of your ego, your false self, your “life” as you know it. It's not easy, you can't do it by yourself, you must become like a child, who trusts, and who is open to learning.

When we think of the Kingdom, like the disciples did, as something that was coming down the road, some glory that they were waiting to see, we miss the reality of it here and now. Jesus told us that greatness is serving and welcoming little ones. That is what the Kingdom looks like, it's not a throne room or even a banquet table, it is a world where we care for and serve one another and reflect the love that God has for all creation. The longer it takes us to get that picture the more little ones will go begging, but more on that next week.