

## *Arguing on the Way*

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Our Gospel lectionary readings over the past three Sundays have been following Jesus as he made his way through the Galilee, which was regarded as the boonies of Palestine, and into the alien Gentile, or non-Jewish, territory of Sidon and Tyre, in present-day Lebanon. In last week's reading, when he was in the town of Caesarea Philippi, Jesus asked that fundamental question about himself that lies at the very heart of our faith in him, "Who do you say that I am?" It's the question about Jesus that we should ask ourselves again and again.

I appreciate the lectionary. It helps to keep a preacher honest. But focusing on a particular passage out of its broader context—using a magnifying glass rather than a flashlight—can rob the scriptural narrative of its drama. And there is a sense of unfolding drama in the account of Jesus' journey in Mark's gospel. Jesus had shown all the signs of being someone extraordinary—healing, speaking with authority, often taking on the religious experts and challenging them about the true meaning of faith and faithfulness. He even traveled into Gentile territory and undoubtedly raised some eyebrows by suggesting that the despised Gentiles, the great unwashed deserve a place at God's table.

So, in the background, and among his followers, questions were being asked and speculations about Jesus were rampant. “Who is this guy? Who is he, really?” In Caesarea Philippi, in last week’s reading, the drama reached a critical turning point, which happens to be right in the middle of Mark’s biography. And that’s not just by chance, because that question lies at the center of our faith.

Peter responded to Jesus’ question with the right answer, “You are the Messiah.” Peter, however, was like the algebra student who has somehow gotten hold of the answer key to the test, and so gives the correct answer, but has no clue of how to arrive at the right answer. When Jesus told Peter what being the Messiah meant--that it meant that Jesus would be humiliated, that he would suffer and die on the cross--Peter refused to believe him. The right answer became the wrong answer. Because of that refusal, Peter was strongly rebuked. “Get behind me Satan. You don’t have any idea how God works.”

In today’s lesson, Jesus and his disciples are “on the way,” which is Mark’s way of saying that Jesus is on his way to fulfilling his destiny. Having acknowledged his identity of Messiah, Jesus now has a destination for his journey. He has set his face toward Jerusalem. He is on the way to claim his vocation. And on the way, he stops once again and tells the disciples what is going to happen: that he must be betrayed, that he will be killed, and that he will be raised from the dead three days later. This time, nobody dares to argue with Jesus. They probably still didn’t get it, but they saw what happened to Peter when he disputed Jesus’ predictions, so they just kept their mouths shut.

But they did argue among themselves. Like the quintessentially human beings that they were, that we are, the disciples began to argue about their status. They argued about who was the greatest, even after Jesus had told them, twice, that it wasn't going to end the way they hoped it would; he has told them that he would die a horrible death. It's as if the disciples were shipmates on the Titanic, but were fighting about who would be at the captain's table when the ship went down.

“What were you arguing about on the way?” Jesus asked. Again, that “on the way” is important because it's a reminder that from now on everything that Jesus and the disciples did or said was a part of his journey to Jerusalem and what would happen there. “What were you arguing about on the way?”

We know about arguing in the church, don't we? We know that some of the worst fights are church fights, and that some of the most painful wounds are those inflicted by church people on other church people. It happens some time or other in every church. From the smallest country church to big city churches; from local Associations to General Synods, it happens. Maybe there is a silver lining in these churchly clouds. Maybe our disagreements are so fierce because we care so much, because our expectations are so high. And it is better to have high expectations than to have no expectations, to be victims of a safe, but deadening cynicism. It's better to have hope and to care about the church than to succumb, without a struggle, to despair and apathy.

Today's passage reminds us that we come by our argumentativeness honestly; it's a part of our tradition and history from the very beginning. There's a joke about Congregationalists that where two are gathered together there will be at least three opinions. We are, whether we know it or not, successors of the disciples. When we read the accounts of Jesus' conversations with the disciples, it's always helpful to remember that "Disciples 'R Us." Like them, we find Jesus' answer to the question of his identity unacceptable because it is so counter-cultural, and yes, so humbling. And most of us, yours truly included, don't do humble well.

Arguing, in itself, isn't bad. Like anger, which is often a component in an argument, arguing can indicate that we do care. Arguing reminds us that we have a conscience, that some things really do matter to us. Jesus didn't tell the disciples to stop arguing—he asked them what they were arguing about. There are, after all, things that are worth arguing about. Religious faith and faithfulness are worth arguing about. Being a part of God's mission is worth arguing about. The church's role in the community, its responsibilities to the community and to the world—these things are worth arguing about. How much we spend on ourselves in comparison with how much we give to others is worth arguing about, and should be argued about. There are lots of things worth arguing about.

But, of course, these lofty topics weren't what the disciples were arguing about. They were arguing about status, and position. They were arguing about who among them was the greatest. In this respect, too, and sadly, we are often worthy successors of the disciples. Even arguments that begin as arguments about principle can often degenerate into arguments about

personality. Our pride, which is rarely a virtue, gets involved. Winning the argument, not the discovery of truth or of God's will, becomes our goal. As James puts it, "Those conflicts and disputes among you, where do they come from? Do they not come from your cravings that are at war within you?"

It's clear from today's gospel lesson from Mark that Jesus found such arguments uninspiring. In dealing with his quarrelsome disciples, Jesus surprised them by turning conventional wisdom on its head. "The first should be last," he said, and the most exalted person gets there by being the most humble servant of all. So much for arguing about status and worth, so much for arguing about who is the greatest. To put it into contemporary vernacular, Jesus is essentially saying to his disciples, "Hey, guess what? This isn't about you." Our status, after all, isn't something we earn or can win through an argument; it's a gift of God, and we all have the same status in God's eyes. We are all God's children, and, like any good parent, God doesn't play favorites among the children.

To drive home his point, then, Jesus talked about children. I want you to imagine the scene. Jesus was in the midst of the crowd that seemed to follow him wherever he went; he'd told his disciples the most terrible things about what was going to happen to him; he'd been remonstrating with his disciples about their failure to believe him--and then he picked up a child. He held the child in his arms and said, "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name, welcomes me. And whoever welcomes me welcomes the One who sent me."

In a certain sense, we really should be like children. Not childish, as the disciples were being, arguing among themselves like playmates in a

schoolyard, “Are not the greatest!” “Am so!” Not childish but childlike. And Jesus picked up a child to emphasize the point.

What does it mean to be childlike? Well, first of all, it means that, like children, we should be vulnerable. Children are vulnerable because they are children—it’s part of what being a child means. Nothing is so heartbreaking as the victimization of a child, because there is so little a child can do in self-defense. I remember children in places like Lebanon and Gaza, who were and are victims of an adult world that sees some children as being more important than other children.

Jesus told his disciples, and us, that we must be vulnerable like children, only unlike children our vulnerability is a choice. We have to choose to be vulnerable. And to do that we have to strip away all our pretensions, all our elaborately constructed defenses. We approach God not on the basis of how important we are, or rather how important we think we are, not because of our wealth or status or brain-power, not by virtue of some order of ranking that we ourselves have devised. We approach God as children, achingly vulnerable members of God’s family.

And we need to recover a child’s sense of wonder. The Polish poet Milocz wrote in words that should resonate with us who live in the Northwoods:

Wonder kept dazzling me, and I recall only wonder,  
The risings of the sun in boundless foliage,  
Flowers opening after the night, universe of grasses,  
A blue outline of mountains and a shout of hosanna.

Wonder, or delight, is what carried us over “childhood’s dark abysses” as another poet, Rilke, put it. Wonder is what we see in the eyes of children when they are allowed to be children. And wonder is what can carry us over the adult abysses of our own making—the unyielding certainties that we hold dearer than truth, the fear and suspicion that separate us from others, the sense of self-sufficiency that opens that yawning gap between ourselves and God. Without a sense of childlike wonder, we are stuck with wanting to learn what we already know, with becoming what we already are.

The disciples, bereft of both childlike vulnerability and childlike wonder, childishly argued with each other on the way. They argued about things that are not even questions for God; their arguments started and ended with themselves, with their own petty concerns about status and importance. As we seek to follow in the way of Jesus, we will argue, but when we argue, let’s argue about the things that really matter, about how we in this congregation may be more faithful to God’s word and God’s will, about how we as individuals and as a congregation can be a part of the body of Christ. Let’s approach one another and God like children, with a child’s sense of vulnerability. And let’s approach life with wonder, let’s be dazzled by wonder, a wonder that will carry us over those dark abysses of our lives, building unimagined bridges to each other, and to God. Amen.

