

In the name of God who through the Word and in the Spirit creates, redeems, and sanctifies. Amen.

In today's Gospel reading we see two approaches to facing the truth: The disciples have now heard Jesus twice tell them that he will not become a warrior king triumphantly deposing the Roman occupation. He has told them that he will accomplish something far more difficult and more meaningful, defeating death and reconciling humankind to God. They don't quite understand what Jesus is saying; I think it would be more accurate to say they don't *want* to understand what Jesus is saying. So they are afraid to ask questions that will cause them to hear once again the disturbing truth of what Jesus' ministry will ultimately entail.

Jesus also knows the truth that he will hear if he asks the question, "What were you arguing about on the way?" But he's not afraid of the answer, though the disciples remain silent, afraid to give him that answer. Jesus decides to address the truth anyway, even in the face of the disciples' unwillingness to speak.

There is an interesting dynamic at work in this scene of facing and avoiding the truth. To give a little context to this exchange between Jesus and his disciples, let's look at when this exchange takes place. Six days after Peter boldly declares that Jesus is the Messiah, Peter, James and John accompany Jesus onto a high mountain where he is transfigured before them, miraculously in the company of Moses and Elijah. They come back down the mountain and find the rest of the disciples in a bit of difficulty. A man has brought his son to them for healing, and they've been unable to do it. Jesus tells them they just needed a little more prayer and fasting, and heals the boy. That's where we pick up today's reading, as they are travelling back to Capernaum where Peter lives. Think about it: the rest of the Twelve Apostles have seen Peter, James, and John go off with Jesus for reasons they don't know; but I can't imagine that those three would be able to hide the emotional response they've had to the terrifying, bewildering wonder of the transfiguration up on the mountain. And Jesus keeps telling them all he will be killed; so the disciples begin to speculate and argue among themselves: If Jesus says he's going to be killed, who should be in charge when he's gone? Who is best prepared to be our leader after Jesus' death? Who is the greatest among us?

I can hear the grumbling and dissension. What about Peter? You mean the big-mouth that Jesus rebuked and called Satan a week ago? James and John? Oh, come on; Jesus teaches peace, and even he nicknamed them the Sons of Thunder because of their tempers. Well then what about us? Please! You guys couldn't even heal that little boy; Jesus had to come down the mountain and do it for you!

Jesus tells them that he will be tortured, killed, and rise again. The disciples decide not to ask any more about that, because it will just bring them back to something they are not prepared to face: what does the Jesus movement look like when it is left in their hands?

Jesus chooses to answer that question for them, and to teach them something about what the holy reign of God should really be like. Sitting in the house at Capernaum, he calls a little child among them. Children had no status; they had no right to self-determination, they had no agency, no autonomy, they were the lowest in the social hierarchy of the culture. And Jesus not only brings the child into their midst, Jesus *embraces* the child, taking the child up in his arms in loving welcome, a declaration of its belonging at the very center of God's household.

“Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.” Jesus tells his disciples that the shape of the coming holy reign of God should not reflect the hierarchy of the world to which they are accustomed. Being first in the coming reign of God will not be for those closest to the seat of power, those who make the greatest impression or the biggest splash; it is not those who work the levers and mechanics of the corrupt system to gain status for themselves who will be first. Those who will be first in the holy reign of God will be those who embrace the least of these; notice the deliberate physical embrace that Jesus demonstrates. He’s not designing a program, or making a donation to a cause that might benefit the least; Jesus is fully recognizing and affirming the humanity he has in common with this child, and the belovedness they both have in God. They are not apart from one another; they are physically and spiritually connected and interconnected. Because if you really wish to welcome God into your life, it means fully welcoming this little, least one.

Who do you think of when you think of someone pushed aside, pushed to the back of the line? When, how, and where can we take or make the opportunity to be in solidarity with them, embracing our common humanity

and our common belovedness the way Jesus showed us with this little child? The truth is there is probably an opportunity presented to us every day. But our discipleship, in many ways, is a process of lifelong *un-learning*, of moving away from the way we've been taught to get along in the world. We can no longer have our minds on earthly things, of being the greatest through power, control, and performance. We need to have our minds in heavenly things: Keeping Jesus' example in mind opens our eyes and our hearts to see those moments where instead of being complicit in the marginalisation, the pushing aside and leaving behind the beloved of God, we can be the welcome, the declaration of belonging that God shows us in Jesus.

We are Christ's eyes, ears, hands, and feet, Christ's body in the world. Jesus embraced and lifted up those who the world pushed aside and left behind. Amid the squabbling and dissension we see and hear around us, where is that little one, the least one that we can lift up, that we can draw near to in solidarity, affirming our belovedness in God? Jesus' life and ministry had nothing to do with establishing himself in the framework that the world had devised; Jesus' life and ministry had everything to do with tearing down those systems that left beloved children of God behind,

below, and at the desperate edges. We are called to continue that ministry; that is the truth from which we must not turn away; it is the truth we must speak, and not remain silent. May it be so. Amen.