

Pentecost 17-September 19, 2021

Baltic and East Nidaros Lutheran Parish

James 3:13-4:3, 7-8a, Mark 9:30-37

“What Were You Arguing About?”

Sermon by Pastor Randall J. Questad

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen

Grace and peace are words we need to hear today and every day. It certainly was also the case in the lessons we just heard for today that were written centuries ago. The second lesson speaks of conflicts and disputes that were happening among the people of God and in the gospel for today, Jesus deals with the arguing that had just happened between his disciples. There is the misconception that the church is a place that should always resemble a bible camp where we hold hands around a warm peaceful fire with a beautiful backdrop of a gorgeous sunset and sing a favorite camp song. You would have to skip over most pages of scripture to believe this is what the church often looks like. Today’s gospel is more representative of the reality of the church. The church is a gathering of sinners where Jesus shows up and convicts them of their sinfulness and frees them with his unconditional forgiveness then sends them out into the world again.

We have skipped over a few pages of scripture where Jesus first announced his death and resurrection. In these skipped over passages, Jesus had a brief mountaintop experience with Peter, James and John much like the bible camp scene I described. The church does have mountaintop experiences, (for me, last week’s joint Rally Day was one), but unfortunately, they are often as short-lived as what happened with these disciples on the Mount where they saw Jesus reflecting the glory of God with his glowing white radiance.

When Jesus taught his disciples about how his salvation will be delivered to his people, it wouldn’t happen with seeing the glory of God with a glowing white radiance. The glory of God and his salvation is revealed just as Jesus said it would, through suffering, death on a cross and then after three days, rising again.

*This is where our reading begins again today. Jesus attempts to teach his disciples for the second time about what he must go through to be their Messiah. After Peter rebuked what Jesus said the first time how he **MUST** suffer, be rejected, be killed and in three days rise again and after experiencing the mountaintop experience on the mount of transfiguration, Jesus repeats the same story. Jesus changes a few words, but the meaning and pathway for Jesus is*

the same. Jesus said that he will be betrayed into human hands, they will kill him, and three days after being killed, he will rise again.

Jesus' disciples did not understand what Jesus was saying. They had never attended an Easter Sunrise service like you, and I have done many times. They had not yet stood at Jesus' empty tomb in fear without recalling these very words Jesus said that after three days he would rise again. We maybe don't understand how salvation happens by the death and resurrection of Jesus, but after hearing so many times, we do believe it. Christians of different denominations disagree about when baptisms should happen or if the Lord's supper is a symbol or a sacrament or if Jesus finds you or you must find Jesus. But there is one thing that we as Christians don't argue about, it is these words of Jesus. Jesus suffered, died, and rose again.

We no longer argue about what Jesus did for us, but we don't understand why Jesus had to suffer. I have seen parts of the movie, "The Passion of Christ". But I honestly, like Peter, don't want to see or hear about the graphic suffering Jesus endured for me. We would have preferred that Jesus would have used some softer language to describe what he would go through. When Jesus said that he would be betrayed it sounds like someone did it to him. It would have sounded nicer if Jesus wouldn't have accused us of playing a role in his death. We have softened the language in the Apostles Creed a little when we say that Jesus "suffered death". Jesus was a little clearer by saying that he was killed.

Jesus had told his disciples the path he would take for the second time to his disciples and Mark records a third telling. But when Jesus showed up in the house and asked his disciples what they were arguing about, it wasn't this pathway to salvation. After hearing that Jesus would be killed, the disciples started to debate among themselves who was next in line to take over for Jesus. Although Jesus' disciples never answer his question about what they are arguing about, Jesus knew what was in their hearts and Jesus knows what we like to argue about today. We like to argue about who is first in the kingdom of heaven and who likely isn't.

This is what the disciples were arguing about. Who would be first in the kingdom of heaven? They had some things happen to them for this question to be asked in their minds and to argue about. Only three of the disciples, Peter, James, and John were invited to go up on the Mount of Transfiguration with him. Should have moved the other disciples further back in the line. Jesus had just commended Peter for saying that he was the Messiah, but he also had condemned him after Jesus told him what he must do to save him. So, they probably thought Peter had been moved to the back of the line. Then another story skipped over is when the disciples had failed to cast out a demon from a boy, so they started to wonder who is the greatest or if any of them have any greatness about them.

This arguing stops when it seems as if out of nowhere, a child appears before Jesus. There are times when I arrive at church uncertain of what to do for a children's message and then it appears. So, it was for Jesus. Jesus needed a prop for his children's message and there is no greater prop for a children's message than a child. And Jesus illustrates who is greatest in the kingdom of heaven by raising up a child. A child who hasn't said or done anything good or bad that would place them towards the front of the line or send them toward the back of the line.

The disciples were silent when Jesus asked what they were arguing about. They were also silent when Jesus raised up the unknown, undeserving Child in his arms and said, "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all." Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me."

Yes, don't be surprised that there may be disagreements among the family of God. We like the disciples; think we need to help Jesus to be saved. Today we are reminded as Jesus raises up a child to illustrate what it means to be first in the kingdom of God. The good news for you is that you too are a child of God and are first in his kingdom by suffering, dying, and rising for you. Amen