

Homily – September 22nd, 2024 – 25th Sunday in Ordinary Time



This competing for power, this desire to be recognized by Jesus as the most important or the greatest Apostle among the twelve is spun out a little differently in the various gospels. It

must have been a real problem, though, because it's mentioned six times in the gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke. Because human nature is human nature, what Jesus has to say to them he also has to say to us.

When these ancient texts were written, the authors didn't have the luxury of paper or an office supply store around the corner. They were limited to writing on parchment (animal skins) or papyrus (plant fibers), and because of that every word had to count. Nothing was fluff; every word meant something.

For instance, it says that Jesus was finishing up his ministry in Galilee, in the north, and heading south to Jerusalem. To head south, to go to Jerusalem meant to go into suffering, death, and resurrection for Jesus. When Jesus broached the subject of his passion, it says that **"the Apostles did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask."** I think their fear was a greater problem than their lack of understanding. They understood enough about Jesus' impending suffering, but they were afraid to deal with it. Out of fear they dodged the issue and decided it was easier to speak about their own ambitions, like who was the greatest among them. Jesus wanted to talk about this downward path that he had to take, that would lead to his suffering and death, and how this was weighing heavily on his mind and heart. To walk to Jerusalem made Jesus a dead man walking. The Apostles, knowing

they didn't have the courage to go where Jesus needed them to go preferred to talk, instead, about their own ambitions and argue about who was the greatest.

When they came to Capernaum, and when he was in the *house* Jesus asked them, ***“What were you arguing about on the way?”*** So now they are in the house. House, in the gospels, is code language for Church. Now that they are in the Church, Jesus is going to give them a hard lesson on what it means to be Church. When Jesus asked them what they were arguing about, they all went silent, but he knew, just by their silence, that they were arguing about who was the greatest. It's very dangerous to be in the same room with Jesus and remain silent. He knows what's in our hearts and minds without us saying a word.

Jesus sat down. Sitting is the posture of the teacher, so now the lesson is about to be given. And like all good parents or all good teachers, your actions will always say much more than your words. He put a child in their midst and said, ***“Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcome me welcomes not me but the one who sent me (God).”***

At the time of Jesus children were considered “non-persons,” much like women in our own country were considered before they had the right to vote. Being without any power and often unprotected, children functioned as symbols of powerlessness and vulnerability. Powerlessness and vulnerability were the very things Jesus deliberately wrapped himself in as he made his way to his Passion in Jerusalem. I like what the late author, Brennan Manning, has to say about children. He spun it a little differently when wrote, ***“Children are our model because they have no claim on heaven. If they are close to God, it is because they are incompetent, not because they are innocent. If they receive anything, it can only be as a gift”*** (p. 27 [The Ragamuffin Gospel](#)). He's right. Children don't have any claim on heaven. They have no claim on the house they live in, the bed they sleep in, the car parked in the driveway, or the toys they play with. They didn't earn any of those things through competence like selling lemonade in front of their house on a hot summer

day. They just know everything came their way by way of gift. In their incompetence, a child is always asking for help. Maybe that's all that Jesus' ever want us to do—to ask. Ask and you will receive. Ask, ask, ask, like a child, and I will delight in giving it to you. St. James in our second reading said, “You don't have because you do not think to ask God.”

Another interesting thing about children besides their glaring incompetence is that they just know they are not in any position to pay back the gifts they have received. And here we are trying, as adults, to earn our way into heaven or to earn another human being's affection.

Speaking about paying someone back, Jesus has a little saying about this. He says, “The next time you put on a dinner, don't just invite your friends and family and rich neighbours, the kind of people who most assuredly will return the favor. No, when you have a party, invite some of the poor, the people who never get invited out, the misfits from the wrong side of the tracks. They won't be able to return the favor, but you will be bless beyond your wildest imagination” (Lk. 14:12-14). That's a challenge in my own life. I can easily pick up the bill at the restaurant for another person because I'm banking on the fact that they will reciprocate the next time and pay for my meal. I'm slower in parting with my hard-earned money when someone comes during the evening, knocks at the door, and asks for money. I'm always asking the question either, “What's in it for me?” or “Am I going to get a tax return?” It's then that I need to remember today's gospel.

But, before you feel too guilty, I want to say, we're all in the same boat and the Apostles themselves, didn't do it any better than you or me. In Luke's version of the Last Supper, no sooner has Jesus said, “This is my body, this is my blood given for you” then the whole thing gets jeopardized. Immediately an argument broke out among the 12 as to who was the greatest. And that was at the Last Supper. They completely missed the self-giving, the emptying of Jesus. That's how quick our egos work.

Jesus was trying to form the first leaders in the Church, and since these gospels are proclaimed today, he is also trying to form us. Jesus said little about future powers in the Church, but he did say, “you are not to resemble rulers of this world, who lord it over people.” You’re in the house, you’re in the Church, you are the Church.

He says to us, as he said to them, “Who would you rather be: the one who eats the dinner or the one who serves the dinner? You’d rather eat and be served, right? But I have taken my place among you as the one who serves” (Lk. 22:27).

To receive a child is to receive Jesus. To receive Jesus is to receive God who sent him. To receive one is to receive all three.

~Fr. Phil