

Thank goodness for exegetical resources, those books I read to help with sermon preparation. This week I gained a new insight into Jesus' conversation with his disciples on the way to Capernaum. This conversation describes his second passion prediction, that he will be betrayed, killed and rise again. The disciples are ignoring the implication of these words and instead are arguing about who was the greatest. It would make a great Saturday Night Live skit with Jesus going all prophetic and mystical while the disciples, who are never portrayed by Mark as solid examples of discipleship, while they are pushing and shoving and squabbling over "who's the best." I mean "dude," "Yo dude!"

You do have to wonder what criteria they were using.

But there is more to this than just a bunch of guys jockeying for top dog. Jesus is not dissing the disciples for their argument. He is not saying that wanting to be the greatest is wrong, he merely points out that "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all." In other words he is laying out the criteria for being the greatest and it is not greatness as the world defines it. He's laying out some really hard criteria. He's asking them to be humble, to serve others, and to create relationships, to welcome everyone including those who have no status in the world. And in case you are wondering, yes, this applies to us to.

Arrogance, boasting, bullying, shoddy dealing, and abuse do not make anyone great.

Jesus illustrates his point by taking a child in his arms as an example of a human being that has no status, and is both vulnerable and dependent. Most of you have heard many times over that children in the ancient world were not valued so Jesus is setting the bar very high. He is asking his disciples to welcome someone whom they would have ordinarily ignored, who would not have been admitted to their discussions, and who could just as easily have been exposed at birth and left to die as an unwanted burden.

From children we can work our way up the ladder to women, and slaves, and dependents of any sort, foreigners, the poor, the sick, the widowed, and the orphaned - all of those human beings that God had reminded the people of Israel to take care of. Jesus is asking his disciples to see with different eyes, to see how God sees us all as equally valuable. Jesus welcomes the child as a representative of himself and of the God who sent him.

Our reading from Jeremiah displays Jeremiah's anger at those who have rejected him for preaching God's word, for warning the people of Israel and Judah that they are going to be destroyed because of their sins against God and each other, because they have violated the covenant. And Jeremiah, like any faithful follower is going to be in danger because of his faithfulness and he is calling out to God do restore justice and righteousness. Being the last to be first is never an easy place to be.

But there's a bit more at work here which gets back to the relational component of Jesus' mission. Jesus came to restore our relationship with God and with each other. All of scripture points in this direction. If you think about the 10 commandments, they are oriented towards right relationship with God and neighbor. Jesus boiled it down to love God and your neighbor as yourself with one of those very uncomfortable expansions of what it means to be a neighbor, ie pretty much anyone with whom we come in contact.

This week's reading from James takes this business about living in relationship to another level. James is obviously talking to a congregation where people have not been behaving well.

He is calling them to be gentle, willing to yield, doing good works without hypocrisy, and trying to make peace. For some reason our lectionary skips verse 4 which says that whoever is a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God, thereby echoing Jesus; criteria for the values with which his disciples, including us, will be judged. "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all."

James cautions against envy and ambition because envy and ambition bring disorder and wickedness, wickedness of an internal and external nature. James describes inner turmoil when we are consumed with greed that leads us to transgress against our neighbors. If you've ever done something that you shouldn't have you know exactly what James means. James uses the word murder but I think he means spiritual as much as physical murder. We try to bring down those with whom we are in competition. We create conflicts over resources, and we ask God for things not out of necessity but out of the desire for self-indulgence.

The answer to a good relationship with neighbors is a good relationship with God and vice versa.

Once again I was reminded at our vestry meeting how our lives do connect with scripture.

Thank you Laura, because it really is your story. Life does tend to play itself out in our tag sales. We hadn't expected a big sale. We went ahead with the sale because Robin is moving and she had some furniture that she wouldn't be taking with her and Laura had a dining room set that had she had replace. We didn't have the piles of small stuff that usually overwhelm us but some of the furniture was big: tables, shelves, and a china cabinet, and we received even more when a local thrift store dropped off some stuff for which they had no room. Business was s-l-o-w and we were wondering how we were going to store this stuff. Mid-afternoon a middle-eastern gentleman came by and started taking pictures of things to send to his wife. He bought some chairs but then wanted to come back for more items; they had just bought a house and apparently it was empty. He returned with his wife and daughter both wearing hijabs and his adolescent son. They were interested in almost everything and since we wanted to have the parish hall cleared for the following morning Laura and Dee offered them some real bargains. Laura's son Andrew even came with a van to deliver the furniture and made two trips to the family's home in Medford. While the van was being loaded the Eastern Farmworkers turned up to start taking the leftovers. The driveway was bustling with people of all colors and ethnicities from different parts of the world, old, young, male, and female, all cheerfully helping to get their jobs done. The man and his family were very grateful; he told Laura that they would think about us and pray for us for the rest of their lives.

Wow! Doesn't that transform a tag sale into something sacred?

Anytime we find ways to connect with others, to create peaceful relationships we are doing God's reconciling work in the world.

Just recently we had another example of what it means when we connect with each other. Richard Root was 93 when he died. Most often people who are that old don't have a whole lot of connections left in this world. Dick was very fortunate in that his beloved wife Jackie was still with him and he had a good relationship with his stepsons. But Dick also had an impact on the people of this parish: 36 people were present for the funeral, 30 or more were present when I did a prayer vigil the day before and that evening the AMVETS did a service, and the Patchogue Elks did a service when still more parishioners were present. Dick was connected. I met his current neighbor at the vigil and she was in tears. Old neighbors who now live in Maine had also come down to pay their respects, so too his physical therapist from Suffolk Rehab and even the two women orderlies who did his laundry turned up as we were leaving the church. This was a testament to Dick's ability to connect to those around him. And at the interment the Patriot Guard Riders were there to do him honor and the country he had served in the Navy also paid its respects. That's a lot of connections.

I think I've said it before but it's all about relationships. Relationships are a measure of our spiritual health with God and with each other. Whether it's a chance encounter in service or the cultivation of a relationship over time St. Paul's is a great place to start. We fulfill our mission to know Christ and to make Christ known one relationship at a time.

Amen.