

Today's Gospel story is ultimately about discipleship, of what it means to truly follow Jesus. Discipleship, while it certainly gives us life in a way that is abundant and purposeful, is certainly not always easy. It's actually often countercultural. Following Christ often leads us to come to terms with some of the most difficult parts of what it is to be human - to love someone and then lose them, to come face to face with people who are sick and suffering, to continue to move boldly forward in faith, hope, and love, even when the world is at its darkest. And yet, Christ walks with us. Christ knows these struggles intimately from his own time as a human here on earth. And we are both comforted and convicted, empowered and energized by choosing the path of love for God and for people.

The disciples in today's story give us the perspective of what it was to follow Jesus in his human time. Following Jesus was consistently confusing, often overwhelming, and always insightful for life here on earth and in heaven beyond.

We begin today's story in just such a place of confusion, overwhelm, and insight, all at the same time. Jesus is teaching his disciples while they are traveling through familiar ministry territory, and told them how his story was going to go. Jesus isn't always this direct in other Gospel accounts, but in Mark, he's pretty straightforward. He was going to be betrayed by his dear friends and then be killed at some point in the near-ish future. After being killed, by the power of God, he would be raised to new life after three days of being dead. If your dear friend or leader or mentor said that to you while you were just on a normal trip somewhere, you would certainly be confused, concerned, and afraid as well! And the disciples were terrified at this very direct revelation - of course they don't want their friend to be betrayed and killed! So they didn't ask about it, and kept to themselves. But of course Jesus notices right away that they've been heatedly discussing it, arguing about something, and eventually wants to know what's going on.

Beyond just arguing about Jesus' fate, the outcome of the life of the one for whom they laid down their lives, they also got into a bit of competition with each other, arguing who is the greatest of the disciples. Jesus shut that

down pretty quickly, using images and words that have quiet but enduring power. He instructs the disciples, and us too, that the one who wants to be first or best is the one who must be last. The one who devotes themselves to others being lifted up and loved and cared for is the one who most closely follows Christ. The one who serves others and focuses themselves and their actions to the people around them, is indeed the one who is greatest.

Let's learn from this argument the disciples had here - instead of arguing amongst ourselves about who is the greatest, what if we simply laid down our weapons of words, and embraced Jesus, the beloved Son, Prince of Peace, and shepherd to all, as the greatest? What if we laid down the battlements of bettering ourselves into exhaustion? Could you let go of the ways you hustle and fight to try and prove yourself as the greatest? What could it feel like to instead use your words, thoughts, and deeds to lift up God as the greatest? To lift up Jesus, the one who finds worth in each and every person, and proclaims the last shall be first and the first shall be last? To let go and release and serve instead of fight and argue?

There is a wisdom and power to the images and words that Jesus uses that transcend time and culture. Whenever Jesus' disciples are confused about something or want to know more, Jesus, though sometimes frustrated, still answers their questions in ways that hold truth for us now too.

The way to truly understand and live into our faith is to see how God is alive in our day to day, in the average, life-sustaining actions of being human. To see how Christ works in the relationships and situations and people that are familiar yet surprise us each day. To live into serving others and opening our eyes to the world around us and following the words and ways of Jesus Christ. To embrace the reality that God is truly within and around us as our stories are written, and indeed co-authors our own creation each day.

The way this story ends, the words and action Jesus leaves his disciples with, is that of caring for a child. He says, "whoever welcomes a child in my

name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me also welcomes the one who sent me.” We welcome God when we care for children, the littlest ones among us, the ones deeply in need of great care and great love. And this image is extended when we consider the reality that we are all children of the God who created us. Whoever welcomes a fellow child of God in Jesus’ name, indeed welcomes God himself. And that welcoming of both our fellow people and God is truly the greatest gift.

Even in the midst of our confusion when it comes to faith, or perhaps our curiosity or questions, Jesus is there to meet us. Jesus may not always meet us in the ways we expect or even give us the answers we are hoping for, but He still walks alongside us, and is truly alive in our world today. The path of following Jesus may not always lead us where we once initially thought we were going, and the new paths that we find may even be better than what we in our human limitations once thought. The important part of following Christ is to simply take action for the sake of God and neighbors. That is what following Jesus is about - it’s about accepting the love and grace given to us in abundance so that we can embody that love and grace for others in the beautiful, broken, created by God, human world.

The lessons of Jesus endure for us even today because of that true humanity that is woven into them. The way we follow Jesus and become disciples is to lean into these human parts of what Jesus teaches us. The last shall be first and the first shall be last, the servant of all. Welcoming children is welcoming God, the one who created us all. And even in the midst of our fears and questions and disbelief, Jesus still meets us, still teaches us, still loves us, with the creative power of God behind him. May you be blessed on your journeys of discipleship, of living out the lessons and love of Jesus each day. Thanks be to God, Amen.