**St. Aidan’s Episcopal Church**

**16th Sunday after Pentecost**

[**Proverbs 31: 10-31**](https://www.lectionarypage.net/YearB_RCL/Pentecost/BProp18_RCL.html#ot1)[**Psalm 1**](https://www.lectionarypage.net/YearB_RCL/Pentecost/BProp18_RCL.html#ps1)[**James 3:13-4:3, 7-8a**](https://www.lectionarypage.net/YearB_RCL/Pentecost/BProp18_RCL.html#nt1)[**Mark 9:3037**](https://www.lectionarypage.net/YearB_RCL/Pentecost/BProp18_RCL.html#gsp1)

**Divine Listening**

When I was a young girl of 10 or 11 or so, there were many occasions for the family to gather at my grandfather and grandmother’s home for Sunday dinner or some festive meal. There were just two of us children, my cousin Judith and myself. Our place was at the foot of the table on either side. The food was passed down the table from adult to adult and around again, until it arrived, somewhat worse for wear at our place at the table. I say worse for wear, because we were faced with, for want of any other descriptive illustration, the dregs. A bit of meat, the last bit of Yorkshire pudding, a couple of bits of vegetables, etc. To be sure, there was enough to feed us and more. It was not quantity so much that was lacking. It was simply that Judith and I were free to enjoy whatever anyone else (read adult) left on the plate for us. Needless to say, the best of the bird had long flown.

Children were to be seen and not heard and that was in the 2oth Century! This is not to suggest that there was no parental affection lacking, nor signs of neglect. Rather, children were just not important.

Interestingly, at the time of Mark’s Gospel writing, children likewise enjoyed, in normal households, affectionate parental connections, but the expectation of future accomplishments of any child was simply not thought about. The life of a child in the Greco-Roman household was of little or no value in the hierarchy the family. Unlike many children of today, who tend to rule the roost, so to speak, rather the child of Jesus’ time and culture were, for all intents and purposes invisible, and under the strict thumb of the patriarch. For all this, however, because children were so marginalized, their stories in the Gospels as being either at the point of death, or demon-possessed or under the control of wicked and cruel adults, they were also thought of as somewhat mysterious beings. They were considered to be closer to God than adults, and their recounting of dreams or sayings were somethings considered as divine omens.

St. Augustine gives a famous example of this belief in his book of Confessions.[[1]](#footnote-1) Augustine is in an intensely emotional state when he hears a child’s voice chanting “Take and read, take and read.” He does so, and a passage in Romans[[2]](#footnote-2) speaks to him clearly to leave behind all his past life without any trepidation. Augustine has been searching all his spiritual life for the kind of certainty, that the disciples just cannot reach at this moment in time, and here it is. He had been waiting for just this moment….anxious, uncertain and now clear and confident in his new way of being and living.

It was this very circumstance that Jesus used to illustrate his point about who would be the greatest in God’s eyes, as he explains “Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me.” He teaches us that whoever is made to be forgotten or ignored in this earthly life, is made greatest in the eyes of the Divine. Likewise, whoever is the servant of all, in other words a slave, is the one who will be first.

This is a radical and profound teaching which Mark has included in his Gospel and unlike the disciples who are desperately attempting to understand Jesus’ teaching, we are able, to look back holistically at just what clues the disciples may have been missing.

First of all, the disciples had witnessed many miracles during their travels with Jesus, from his early miracles like turning water into wine, his healing miracles and his raising of Lazarus, as told in the Gospel of John. The disciples had literally been to the mountain top with Jesus and seen him transfigured before their eyes.

And yet, in today’s Gospel, Jesus finds it necessary to try to explain to the disciples for the second time that he, the Son of Man will be betrayed, will be killed and that he will rise again in three days. In fact, in Mark’s Gospel, Jesus will have to go through this teaching about his coming fate, not just once but three times. You may recall the first time he told them, they were at Caesarea Philippi, when he asked the disciples, “Who do you say that I am?” Remember, Peter answering, “You are the Messiah.” Whereupon, Jesus turns on the unsuspecting Peter…..saying “Get behind me Satan….you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.”

Poor Peter. Poor disciples. Poor us. We really are so very human. I’m not sure we would have fared much better than Peter, who did not hear, or did not listen closely enough to Jesus when Jesus warned him and warned the other disciples not to tell anyone about who he really was.

No problem, Jesus, they, none of them, at the time, had a clue!

They were still existing within the parameters of their human thought processes. Jesus can do anything, so what’s all this about being betrayed and killed and whatever else it was he was talking about. As they were walking with Jesus through Galilee, they were arguing among themselves about who among them was the greatest, who’s the star, who’s the chosen one, who will sit at Jesus’ right hand when he finally captures the throne and becomes the King of Judah. That’ll be the day.

Jesus, knowing full well of their argument, asks them to share their conversation with him. They are struck into silence, There is something about what Jesus has been saying that has brought a measure of fear into their hearts. Perhaps, so much so, that they are afraid to ask him to repeat himself and explain it all to them yet again in a way they can understand. Sometimes we find that keeping silent it is because we feel to vulnerable to risk the possibility of hearing something we do not want to hear, or because we fear hearing what we might hear.

Or perhaps we fall silent because we cannot reveal what it is we were saying a moment or so before. Perhaps we can think for a moment about how we may prefer to be silent were Jesus to confront any one of us at any moment and ask us what it was we had been talking about….or thinking about…or arguing with our spouses, partners, acquaintances, or anyone else, about. Just what might it have been that we were thinking about that we deemed more important than God’s direction for our lives and our direction toward God. Perhaps we would be struck suddenly dumb, as we hold the strong possibility that God knows only too well our thoughts, words and actions. Whether we can confess them before God, or whether we would rather hope God hadn’t noticed, is frankly, a demon each one of us has to battle.

There are times in our own lives, that we might not understand and, indeed, may be afraid to question or bring up. Most of us have questions waiting to be asked, or questions that are too late to ask, having seen the moments come and go wherein we might have asked our burning questions. There are times in our lives when we, too, retreat into silence about our thoughts and our fears, our dreams and our hopes. Our uncertainty, our shyness, our fear of knowing truth, our inability to think beyond the present moment, often creates barriers to our own understanding of how to move forward more fruitfully in our lives. Sometimes, the questions are simply impossible to ask, but often the questions we have, we do not ask, because we do not dare.

Sadly, due to their inability to be honest with Jesus, and due to their lack of understanding about what he is trying to convey to them, their relationship with Jesus , that was so filled with joy and certainty, has been somehow clouded by fear and uncertainty. That was the cost to the disciples for their inability to ask the important questions…for keeping silent. That is often the cost to us, when we allow moments of truth to pass by, keeping silent as the opportunities for deepening our relationships slip away.

Children are too innocent to enter into such self-preserving complexities and Jesus points to a child as one who is open to listening and hearing, receiving and accepting all that God reveals and thus the child become first to hear and know truth, first to hear and know the voice of the Divine. How many times do we smile ruefully to ourselves, shaking our heads saying “Out of a child’s mouth.” We smile with recognition of innocent and trustful acknowledgement. We are rueful because we recognize how much innocence the worldly sophistication of adulthood has erased from our hearts. Children speak out what they hear and what they see, with no guile or manipulation. Thus, in the eyes of the Dinve, in God’s order of things, the least of these in human terms, the poor servant, the slave, becomes the greatest of all, due to that one’s openness to possibility, hope and trust in whatever it is they see or hear exists. They have no such possibility of hope or trust in their human overseers.

Along the similar lines of our reflection last week, these interactions between Jesus and his disciples are clearly correctional on Jesus’ part. He uses children as his example to try to convey to the disciples his point. These small innocents, who are in some mysterious way, connected to a divine presence when they are welcomed by Jesus. The lesson being a familiar one to us and yet so seemingly difficult to remember: to welcome the powerless, like a powerless child, is to welcome not only Jesus, but the One who sent him. (9:37)

To put it another way, to be part of a community, or a community itself in which the unnoticed, forgotten, ignored and neglected of society find no welcome at all, is to be in a community that exists for strictly human purposes rather than divine. In fact, to be in such an unwelcoming community is to be in a community without the presence of God at all.

Jesus, said, “He who abides in me and I in him, bears much fruit; for without me you can do nothing.”[[3]](#footnote-3)

Jesus’ welcome to the child is a lesson in a form of leadership with compassion and what he expects of the disciples and what he expects of us. To expand ourselves into a divine realm of leadership is to receive the least of these and to receive the rejected and forgotten among us. It is to be open to God’s divine rule rather than fiercely adhering to our human rule. It is a form of hospitable leadership, even in the face of those fighting over preferential treatment as were the disciples as they quarreled about who was the greatest in the midst of Jesus’ glory.

Jesus is simply reminding us to look to our own household first. To look to our church. To look to all the communities in which we belong. The one who wishes to be thought of as the greatest and most important in the house, must in fact, be “servant” to the household or community. We can only begin to get there when we begin to glimpse and adopt the attitude of the least of these, the attitude of the slave.

To begin to learn, we have to listen. Not to just part of the story. Not to just the part that involves our own potential success. Not to just politics that satisfy our own sense of comfort. Not to feel more important, more powerful, to feel closer to the center of power, but rather to hear the rest of the story. To understand the sacrifice involved in the giving up of oneself and one’s human desires, in order to take on the divine requirement for that personal laying down of oneself, in order to be lifted up anew, as a child of God, innocent, absent of guile or jealousy, filled only with anticipation and hopeful joy for what God has in store for us all.

To be a child is to be open to awe and wonder and possibility. It is the least of these to whom we listen last, if at all. And perhaps the core of this teaching from Jesus is buried so deep that we still, like the disciples, are prone to miss it. Perhaps when we begin to listen to the least of these, not just hearing the first part of the story, but all the story, we will begin to understand that, at the end of the story, the least of these will not only rise in glory, but will be leading the way to our own liberation from prisons of our own making.

The question remains. When we are given liberty to make choices for ourselves or for God, are we willing to make the sacrifices necessary to take time for listening to the Divine, in order to better accomplish radical servant leadership in our homes, in our church, in the world, and most importantly in ourselves. If we are, then our servanthood and divine listening will not only serve us well, it will serve as nothing less than God’s healing hope for the world.

Amen
Written to the Glory of God

E. J. R. Culver+

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1. Confessions 8:12) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Romans 13:1-12 “Let us live honorably as in the day, not in reveling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarrelling and jealousy. Instead, put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.” [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. John 15:5b [↑](#footnote-ref-3)