

“Ask the Right & the Hard Questions”

Message by DD Adams
Providence Kemptown U.M. Church
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The epistle lesson is from James, chapter 3, verse 13 through chapter 4, verses 3, 7 and 8a. ¹³Are any of you wise and understanding? Show that your actions are good with a humble lifestyle that comes from wisdom. ¹⁴However, if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your heart, then stop bragging and living in ways that deny the truth.

¹⁵This is not the wisdom that comes down from above. Instead, it is from the earth, natural and demonic. ¹⁶Wherever there is jealousy and selfish ambition, there is disorder and everything that is evil. ¹⁷What of the wisdom from above? First, it is pure, and then peaceful, gentle, obedient, filled with mercy and good actions, fair, and genuine. ¹⁸Those who make peace sow the seeds of justice by their peaceful acts.

4What is the source of conflict among you? What is the source of your disputes? Don't they come from your cravings that are at war in your own lives? ²You long for something you don't have, so you commit murder. You are jealous for something you can't get, so you struggle and fight. You don't have because you don't ask. ³You ask and don't have because you ask with evil intentions, to waste it on your own cravings.

⁷Therefore, submit to God. Resist the devil, and he will run away from you. ⁸Come near to God, and he will come near to you. Wash your hands, you sinners. Purify your hearts, you double-minded.

The gospel lesson is from Mark, chapter 9, verses 30 through 37. ³⁰From there Jesus and his followers went through Galilee, but he didn't want anyone to know it. ³¹This was because he was teaching his disciples, "The Human One will be delivered into human hands. They will kill him. Three days after he is killed he will rise up." ³²But they didn't understand this kind of talk, and *they were afraid to ask him.*

³³They entered Capernaum. When they had come into a house, he asked them, "What were you arguing about during the journey?" ³⁴They didn't respond, since on the way they had been debating with each other about who was the greatest.

³⁵He sat down, called the Twelve, and said to them, "Whoever wants to be first must be least of all and the servant of all." ³⁶Jesus reached for a little child, placed him among the Twelve, and embraced him. Then he said, ³⁷"Whoever welcomes one of these children in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me isn't actually welcoming me but rather the one who sent me."

This is God's word for God's people. God we ask your blessing on the reading, hearing, understanding, and doing of your word. Amen.

Our passage in Mark is the second time Jesus predicts his suffering and crucifixion to the disciples; this occurs three times in Mark (8:32-33; 9:32; 10:35-41). Each time Jesus teaches them further about discipleship because they don't understand what he's predicting about his imminent suffering.

Jesus demonstrates his teachings by healing people who go from blindness to receiving their sight. The disciples have a similar experience. They misunderstand Jesus' mission and purpose—they're blind. But overtime, Jesus' teaching becomes clearer. Much like our own spiritual journey. We all go from spiritual blindness to receiving our sight.

In Mark 8, Jesus asked the question, "Who do you say that I am?" Peter answered, "You are the Christ." Peter's answer was right, but for the wrong reason. His understanding of who "Christ" was and why he came was twisted. The disciples wanted Jesus to free Israel from Roman oppression and fix their suffering world. Jesus tells Peter, "Get behind me, Satan. You're not thinking God's thoughts but human thoughts." The disciples don't understand. They're blind.

In the Gospel reading for today, the disciples are frustrated again hearing the second prediction about Jesus imminent suffering. They're afraid and don't ask questions . . . perhaps this happens when we fail more than once with the same thing. We see our lack of understanding and inability to "get it" so we shut down. Maybe it's the anguish and fear that surrounds it, and we don't want to confront it.

Throughout Mark's gospel the disciples didn't understand why Jesus, who had performed so many miracles, would allow himself to be killed. He'd fed thousands, given sight to the blind, and done things no one else had ever done. Why did Christ have to die? It made no sense. The disciples wanted the Roman government to be conquered and silenced—not Jesus!

The disciples wouldn't ask Jesus the hard question. Why do you have to suffer? Maybe they had to experience some things for it to make sense, and without that experience, trying to understand was useless. They couldn't receive how Jesus defined greatness. We avoid that same concept don't we?

We don't ask the hard questions either out of fear just like the disciples, and when we do, we probably don't have the right reason for asking—just like Peter. So what did the disciples do instead of asking Jesus why he had to suffer? They began to argue which each other about who was the “greatest.”

Here Jesus redefines what true greatness means. It's not winning as the world defines it. It's not success or failure as others might see it. Rather, it's letting go of our selfishness and self-sufficiency. It's submitting to God's thoughts and ways and moving closer to God; this is picking up your cross. It's putting what you want aside and serving others . . . and you know what, there's something about giving attention to and providing for the least among us that causes us to become

like the least of these—this is wisdom. Not struggling for status and position, but serving the least. James puts it like this.

“Wherever there is jealousy and selfish ambition, there is disorder and everything that is evil” (James 3:16). The disciples were arguing about who was the greatest. They skirted around what Jesus was teaching them about greatness. They wouldn’t ask the hard questions, so instead, they argued about who was right.

The disciples were jealous and wanted something they didn’t have, and so they fought. Jesus told them, “You don’t have because you don’t ask. You ask and don’t have because you ask with evil intentions, to waste it on your own cravings” (James 4:2-3); this isn’t wisdom that comes from God. Now looking at Mark...

In Jesus’ day children had no rights. They didn’t speak unless they were spoken to. Children trust and follow those who care for them. They lack understanding, and they’re under the authority of others. They’re the least. In Mark 9:37, Jesus brings children to the public eye which got people’s attention!

He calls them to himself along with their low status and welcomes them into his arms and says, “Whoever wants to be first must be least of all and the servant of all . . . whoever welcomes one of these children in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me isn’t actually welcoming me but rather the one who sent me.” Jesus embraces the least, the powerless, those with no voice and of low

status. If their motives aren't always correct, welcome them anyway. If they're in need provide what you can for them.

Asking ourselves the right and the hard questions puts us in our place. Life isn't about what we want. It's about embracing what God wants us to become in Christ. So if someone's in need. Provide for them. If you think they're taking advantage of you know that many followed Jesus to receive the basics in life and Jesus welcomed them.

Confronting the hard questions in our lives dispels our fear. Because when we look at Christ face to face we see the least of these, and our reliance turns toward God rather than self. Asking the right question inspires us to die to selfishness and live for Christ. Let's define greatness as Christ does. Let's identify with the least and do what we can to provide their need. Let's pray.

Holy and humble God, teach us to have wisdom that comes down from the Father above. To lose our selfish ways, and with humility to think of others as better than ourselves. To have the wisdom that is pure, and then peaceful, gentle, obedient, filled with mercy and good actions, fair, and genuine. Help us to sow seeds of justice and show peaceful acts that come from your heart of love. Amen.