

Asking Rightly
Mark 9:30 – 37; James 3:13 – 4:3, 7 – 8a
Sunday, September 23, 2018

This past week Jen and I have been bombarded with questions from one of our children who wants to get a new video game. We have responded that we don't think this game is appropriate or a good game for them to be playing, so, no, we are not going to get this. But that did not stop them from asking. "Why can't I get it?" "When *can* I get it?" "How old do I have to be?" "All of my friends play it. I feel left out." The other day, as they were coming off the bus, the first thing we hear is, "My friend says this game is actually *good* because it helps you with problem solving and survival skills and all these other things that I can't remember, but just ask him." He just *kept at it* over and over and over again.

At one point, it turned passive aggressive. I walked into the living room and found him just sitting on the couch looking at a *picture* of the game with sadness and longing. We were in the car, talking about school, and he said, "School is boring. All of my friends just talk about this game, but I can't talk about it because I don't play it." Jen and I were in the kitchen getting dinner ready when he came in and said, "Can you just come *look* at it?" As he walked away, dejected, Jen said, "He is persistent."

But that's the thing with kids, right? When they *want* something, they *ask*. When they want to *know* something, they *ask*. If they don't understand something, they *ask*. Any question that pops into their mind – at any time, in any place, appropriate or not – they *ask*. And while it can be *exhausting*, it's a *good* thing, right? That's how they *explore* and *learn* and *grow* – by asking questions. It's something that a lot of us *lose* as we grow up. We get conditioned to stop asking questions because we're "supposed to know," and we don't want to look *foolish* or *stupid*. We don't want people to think we are *lacking*. So you're having a conversation with someone, and

they say, “I was just at this event over at the Johnson Center. You know where that is, right?” And we say, “Mmm, yeah,” even when we have *no idea*. There is something in a lot of us that, the older we get, we stop asking questions.

Jesus tells his disciples for the second time that he will be betrayed and killed and, after three days, he will rise again. Once again, they have *no idea* what he is talking about. It says, “They did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him.” They might have been afraid because of what happened to *Peter* last week. Jesus says this, Peter challenges him on it, and Jesus says, “Get behind me, Satan!” They don’t want to get rebuked like Peter did; called out in front of the other disciples. Or maybe each disciple thinks that all the *others* understand, and they don’t want to be the only one who admits they don’t get it. You can picture Jesus telling them that he’s going to be betrayed and suffer and die and rise again in three days and asking them, “Do you understand?” And they sneak peaks at each other and say, “Mhmm. Yeah. Three days.” For whatever reason, they are afraid to ask.

Then they start arguing with each other over which one of them is the *greatest*. Jesus finds out about it (because he asks a question), and he says to them, “Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.” Then he places a small child among them. Now, a lot of the time we understand what Jesus does here as telling them that they need to be like a little child. Be gentle, innocent, trusting, inquisitive, ask questions. And he *does* say that elsewhere. In Matthew’s gospel Jesus says, “Unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.” That was actually the sermon that I was expecting to preach today. But that’s *not* what Jesus says *here*. He says, “Whoever welcomes such a child in my name welcomes me.” He’s not telling them to *be like* a child. He’s telling them to *welcome* a child. Other translations

have it as, “Whoever *receives* such a child in my name *receives* me.” The Greek word is *dechomai*, and it literally means, “to take by the hand.” *Whoever takes such a child by the hand takes me by the hand.* What is Jesus talking about?

It helps to understand that, while our culture *prizes* youth and *values* children (we place them on a pedestal and base our lives and so much of our culture around them), that was *not* the case in *Jesus’* time. In the first-century Greco-Roman world, children were not commonly thought of as innocent, sweet, and trusting. They were thought of as *nuisances* that were to be *disciplined* and *tolerated* until they became useful, reasonable adults.¹ *One day* they would become valuable, when they could help with the work and earn money and take care of the parents and ensure the survival of the family. But *until* then, they were just in the way. They didn’t *contribute* anything; they *used up* limited resources. They had no rights, no legal protection, no status, and no power. They were *weak*, and they were *vulnerable*.

There’s the story right after this, in chapter 10, where people are bringing children to Jesus for him to bless and heal. The disciples see this, and they get upset. It says they speak sternly to the people. Why? Because, they think, why should Jesus be wasting his time and energy on children, who can’t “get it” and can’t do anything about it? He should be focusing on the adults. But Jesus says, “Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs.” The kingdom of God *belongs* to those who have no rights, no legal protection, no status, and no power; to those who are *weak* and *vulnerable*.

Who would the kingdom of God belong to in *our* society?

¹ Marion Soards, Thomas Dozeman, Kendall McCabe, *Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary: Year B, After Pentecost 2*. Pg. 56.

The disciples are basing their understanding of greatness on the *world's* standards – power and prestige. But Jesus says that greatness is shown in how we receive and serve the weak and the vulnerable; in how we take by the hand those who have no power and no prestige. In receiving *them* and serving *them*, we receive and serve *God*.

So there is the *world's* understanding of greatness and power, and then there is *God's* understanding of greatness and power. James follows up on this. He writes that there are two types of *wisdom*. We talked about a month ago about how wisdom is not just *what you know*, but how you *use* what you know. And James says, “Okay, what does that *look* like, to be *wise*?”

There is the wisdom of the *world* that is marked by envy and selfish ambition, and deceit. James says, “You *want* something and do not *have* it, so you commit murder. You *covet* something and cannot obtain it, so you engage in disputes and conflicts. You do not *have* because you do not *ask*. You ask and do not *receive*, because you ask *wrongly*, in order to spend what you get on your pleasures.” According to the wisdom of the world, if you *want* something, you don't *ask*, you just *take* it or find a way to *get* it. If you *do* ask, you ask in a way that is looking out for yourself – your own wellbeing and pleasure – not the wellbeing of *others*. The wisdom of the world is all about looking out for one's self.

And there is the wisdom of *God* that is marked by peace and gentleness and mercy; looking out for *others*. When you *want* something, you ask, but you're asking in such a way that seeks the wellbeing of those around you – *everyone*, not just yourself.

James calls us to turn away from the wisdom of the *world* (he says, “Resist the devil.”), and draw near to God. How do we draw near to God? By drawing near to the weak and the vulnerable.

Remember what Jesus says, “When you take *them* by the hand, you take *me* by the hand.” The disciples were living according to the wisdom of the *world*, looking out for *themselves*. Christ calls them (and *us*) to live according to the wisdom of *God*, by giving of ourselves, *sacrificing* ourselves, to care for the weak and the vulnerable.

Last Sunday, we had a memorial service here. And after the service, I was downstairs in the Fellowship Hall at the reception, when a man came up to me. We talked briefly about the service and the person who had died, and then he said to me, “Can I ask you a dumb question? Could you please pray for the Catholic Church? We are going through *such* a hard time right now. Our leaders that we trusted with our lives and our faith and our *children* have betrayed us, and we are really experiencing a crisis of faith.”

We’ve all heard the stories in the news; what happened right here in Pennsylvania. Priests abusing children, and those higher up protecting the priests, covering it up, moving them around rather than removing them from ministry, and allowing the abuse to continue for *decades*. Generations of children broken by men whose only job was to model for these children the love of Jesus Christ. But they sought their *own* power and satisfaction, rather than looking out for the weak and the vulnerable.

As this man spoke to me, his eyes filled with tears, and I could tell that this man was *hurting* and *broken*. He *needed* something, and he was not afraid to *ask* for it. But he wasn’t asking for *himself*. He was asking on behalf of *others*, on behalf of the weak and the vulnerable. He was seeking *their* wellbeing. He was hurting and suffering *with them*, because he had drawn near to them, received them, taken them by the hand.

Jesus talks about taking up our cross and following him. *That's* what that looks like. Emptying ourselves out of ambition and pride and self-focus, and bearing the suffering and sin of the world. Suffering alongside those who are suffering. Letting our hearts break for that which is broken, and then living in ways that seek to bring about healing and peace. Shunning the world's notions of greatness and power, and drawing near to those who are weak and vulnerable. Because when we draw near to *them*, we draw near to *God*. When we serve *them*, we serve *God*.