

Sermon Prepared by The Rev. Matt Rhodes for
St. Stephen's Episcopal Church, Forest, Virginia
Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost, September 19, 2021

(James 3:13-4:3, 7-8a; Mark 9:30-37)

Growing up in the 1970s and 1980s, I didn't have many of the things to entertain me that are available to kids today. There weren't 268 cable channels; we had the big three networks and, with one turn of a second dial and a bit of luck we could on a clear day get PBS. For many years there were no video games, and at that time the closest things to iPhones were James Bond movie gadgets and Star Trek communicators. We simply had books and toys and our imaginations.

But when the books had been read, the toys had been played with, and our imaginations failed us and we begun complaining to Mom and Dad about how utterly bored we were, there was always plan B: the car trip. Whether it was a Sunday afternoon drive in the country or a longer vacation trip, I remember that we spent a lot of time in the car. Of course, the announcement of each drive led to *the* big argument among me and my brother and sisters: who got to sit by the window?

Let me be clear: *no one* wanted to be jammed in the middle. We all wanted the window seat ... the seat of prestige and freedom. Even today, there's something very rewarding for me about getting the window seat. I want to be in the spot where there's light and a view, a place that allows me to look at what's going on. Whenever I travel by plane or train, if it's available you'll find me sitting in a window seat.

In today's Gospel, Jesus and the disciples have been on their own journey, traveling through Galilee to Capernaum. As they are walking, Jesus overhears the disciples arguing – perhaps walking in small groups of three or four just behind him, arguing with one another in what were undoubtedly their worst stage whispers. The cause of the argument? Essentially they all wanted to know who, in the eyes of God and of their beloved rabbi, had the window seat. Just like my siblings and me, none of the 12 wanted to be jammed in the middle. They wanted the position of prestige. They wanted to be noticed. They wanted to be remembered.

They all had, as Martin Luther King, Jr. famously called it in a sermon from 1968, the drum-major instinct – the desire “to be important, to surpass others, to achieve distinction, to lead the parade.”¹

Again I see Jesus throwing up his hands and saying, “*Really*, guys? Still? Haven't you listened to a *word* I've been saying?” It wasn't for lack of time with them. They had been traveling together for a while. They had eaten together, and rested

¹ “The Drum Major Instinct.” <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/drum-major-instinct-sermon-delivered-ebenezer-baptist-church>

together, and undoubtedly even laughed and cried together. They were with each other pretty much 24/7. The disciples also had witnessed many miraculous things during this time. Jesus had taught them, shared stories with them, and tried to show them that it was possible to bring the kingdom of God to earth, at that time and in that place.

But even after all of that, there were times the disciples just didn't get it. It wasn't just Peter, as we heard last week, who stumbled on the journey. In their enthusiasm to be the best disciples they could be, they often missed the point of what Jesus was trying to show them. He certainly called them out on a lot during their time together, as he does here.

But in this instance, the call-out is a bit different than even they may have expected. They didn't get a question that Jesus knew they wouldn't be able to answer. He didn't rebuke them as he did in last week's Gospel passage, when Peter challenged Jesus' prediction of his own suffering and death. Instead, Jesus quietly sits down, tells them that they need to stop worrying about who will be the leader and start worrying instead about who will be the servant.

Then he brings a child into their midst. We don't know if this is a little boy or girl, but it had to be frightening for this small one to suddenly be brought from outside the circle into the center of a group of grown-ups. While it's not recorded, I can easily see Jesus motion the child over, smile, reassuringly touch the child's cheek, and put his arm around the little guest before looking slowly at each of the disciples and essentially saying, "Do you *really* want to be great? Then *this* is who you need to remember."

We all have an opportunity to sit by the window. But before we commit to trying to grab that seat, we have to remember that there's a lot of responsibility that comes with being by the window. We are not entitled to sit there and simply *look* at what's happening on the other side of the glass. As humans – as children of God – we have a far greater obligation: the obligation to truly *see* what is going on, and to *act*.

As I have come to know you over the past several months, and even from what I've heard about you and witnessed for myself in years past, I have seen time and again your willingness to not just look, but to *see*, and to not wait for others to lead, but to *act*. You know what's going on outside the windows of this place, and whenever possible you strive to do something about it. *You* are the disciples who understand what Jesus was saying.

But sadly, we live in a world where many look ... and then look away. There are those who see, but see what they want to rather than what is really there. We even witness some who act ... but act out of hostility and fear, rather than compassion and love.

In the midst of this sorrowful thought, however – in the midst of the hunger and poverty and homelessness that we see every day in the world outside our windows – it is the *children*, like that child invited by Jesus to be offered as an example to the disciples, who become the leaders just as much as they are the ones for whom Jesus says we are to show concern. We are told that by welcoming them, we welcome Jesus and – through him – welcome God. But for me, welcoming them is not enough. We have to *learn* from them – and through their actions, we can truly see God at work in the world.

We see examples of their leadership everywhere, in our own families and elsewhere. There are students who volunteer in food pantries and take part in cleanup projects. Teens and youth from many churches here in Central Virginia and across the country giving up their vacations every year to participate in mission trips, bringing hope to those feeling hopeless and sharing love with those feeling forgotten. There are students who rally for causes in which they believe and lift their voices to ensure their generation is part of the discussion.

These students do these things not to be great, but because they hear the call to do them. For these young men and women, and for each of us, and for all who act on behalf of others, greatness is achieved. Greatness does not come from who we know. It doesn't come because of where we sit or where we stand. *True* greatness comes from what we do, as we heard earlier in the epistle of James, with the wisdom, the mercy, and the good fruits we receive from God. *What* you and I do with what we have been given is a choice; *that* we do it is our responsibility.

As Dr. King concluded, “[D]on't give up this instinct. It's a good instinct if you use it right. It's a good instinct if you don't distort it and pervert it. Don't give it up. Keep feeling the need for being important. Keep feeling the need for being first. But I want you to be first in love. I want you to be first in moral excellence. I want you to be first in generosity.”²

With that small child in the Gospel reading as our model, may we continue to be open to being brought into the presence of Jesus, the wisdom to truly hear what he tells us, and the courage to act ... the courage to welcome ... the courage to lead by being servants.

And may we always remember that we don't have to be first to be great in the eyes of God.

² *Ibid.*