

“Love Makes Us Jesus People”

I remember my first semester in college. I had been a good student in high school. I had done well in most of my classes, and especially well in math. I took and excelled in the most advanced math classes that my high school offered. Then I went to college. Now the playing field was different. Everyone around me was a good student or a great student. What's more my calculus class was a large lecture course. There were ninety or a hundred students in the class. It was intimidating. Just getting a good seat in the class was hard. Often I found myself sitting in the back of the large lecture hall trying to figure out what the professor was saying and see what he was writing on the chalk board. It was hard to keep up and hard to understand this new math language. It seemed like everyone understood what he was teaching except me. When someone did ask a question, it seemed to me that the first thing I needed was someone to explain the question. In the midst of all of that I was not going to ask a question. I was like the disciples in today's Gospel lesson.

They did not understand what Jesus was telling them. It is clear from our earlier reading that the disciples did not understand what Jesus meant by his definition of Messiah. His further explanations were not getting through. They were so confused with Jesus' messiah talk they did not know what question to ask. His information and concepts were so alien to them that they were strangers in a strange land.

Their lack of understanding did not stop at least two of his disciples from arguing about who was the most important disciple, and thus who would sit on Jesus' right hand in his glory. First of all, it is presumptuous to argue about which of them was the greatest disciple. At the least it lacked humility. In fact, Matthew was so bothered by the disciples' actions that he had their mother make the request of Jesus in order to absolve the disciples. Second, they do not even understand what Jesus means by Messiah. They are still stuck in their old thinking about a messiah as a king or the general of a great army. Jesus has explained several times now that the messiah would be tried and put to death. They do not understand that to be on Jesus' right hand means to die alongside him. They will not understand that until after his death and resurrection. It will take more than eloquent explanations to break through their old thinking.

When Jesus confronts the disciples about their foolish argument, they act like kids who have been passing notes in class. They look around as if they do not know what Jesus is talking about. I can hear them saying, “Oh no teacher it wasn't me. That was someone else.” Or “I think you should ask Andrew or James they seemed to be talking a lot. Maybe they were arguing about something.”

Jesus like any good teacher who knows what is going on before he even asks the question might have said something like, I know you were talking about who is the greatest among you; who is my number one disciple. Think about it this way. “Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.” If they were not already confused they would certainly be confused now. Jesus tells them that in order to be first they have to be last. A classic conundrum.

Think about it as they must have. We live in a world where first and last are distinctly different. Those that are first are the winners those in last place are the losers. More money makes you a winner. More power makes you a winner. More possessions make you a winner. Control over other people makes you a winner. Having many servants makes you a winner. That is the way the world worked then and seems to still. Yet, Jesus says that what the world thinks makes a winner is totally wrong. You cannot be a winner in God's kingdom unless you put yourself in the role of a servant. If you want to have first place in the eyes of God, you have to put yourself in last place. A righteous person is humble and a servant. The righteous person does not seek of wealth or power. Neither are they self-righteous. In God's economy what is valuable is not what the world values. A person of God serves others. It is a tough row to hoe.

As the reading from the Book of Wisdom points out, the righteous person has obstacles beyond ego and the ways of the world. The righteous person also has to contend with those who work against them. The writer states that the unrighteous will "lie in wait for the righteous [one], because [they are] inconvenient to [them]." The wicked will attempt to overthrow the righteous. The wicked will also do their best to blemish the character of righteous person by false accusations. The wicked will call the righteous a liar and tell lies to prove it. The wicked fabricate stories to distract the easily deceived. They will contend that the righteous are the wicked deceivers. That is how Satan works.

Sometimes they are so effective that other righteous people are confused. Unfortunately, we do not have white hats and black hats to tell us who are good and bad as we do in the movies. Even if we did the forces of evil would use their wiles to confuse us. The one good indicator goes back to what Jesus said to his arguing disciples. If you want to be first be the servant of all. The ones who quietly serve, who seek no recognition for themselves and the ones who do not disparage others are the righteous. Let us not be fooled by power, pomp, money, possessions, or anything else that sparkles of celebrity and self. Look for the one in the back of the group helping others. Of course what Jesus wants is that we become one of them. Those are the Jesus people. Those are the people who see Jesus in others. Those are the people who put love before anything else.

As Bishop Michael Curry says, "If it is not about love, it is not about Jesus." Love is the litmus test for righteousness. If it is about anything other than loving and caring for one another, and most especially those, who like the little child, cannot care for themselves, then it is not about God. That is what it means to be Jesus people. Do not let anyone tell you differently. Love and service that is what Jesus said. That is how we are called to live as people of Jesus and people of God.