

Church of the Covenant  
September 20, 2015

TEXTS: James 3:13-4:3; Mark 9:30-37

### Arguments, Aylan and Altitude

We continue our fall series on “Questions and Conundrums from Jesus” from the lectionary’s texts from Mark’s gospel. And this next question Jesus asks his followers is – “What were you arguing about?” Maybe the better question, Jesus, would be “What don’t your followers argue about?”. Back in the day it was over are the Gentiles in or out, then Jesus’ humanity or divinity. Now – the list is nearly endless. Which worship style is better – traditional or contemporary? Which Bible translation is better – NIV, NRSV, KJV? Communion – served in the pews or come on up intinction? We argue over which scripture texts carry more weight and how to interpret them. We argue over the color of the carpet in the sanctuary. We argue over who is worthy of membership, ordination, marriage. You know this. You’ve lived this. We followers of Jesus take sides, judge each other, feel better about ourselves being right, being in, when we can keep others wrong, keep others out. The path from righteous to self-righteous is short, and regrettably very well-worn. So – what were those first disciples arguing about? Let’s have a listen: READ MARK TEXT.

Who was the greatest. Oy. Who gets to be line leader when following Jesus. Who is doing discipling better. Who is in the inner Jesus circle.. Hmm...

And the irony of this is painful. Jesus has just said AGAIN that the one they claim to be following “is going to be betrayed into the human hands. They will kill him, and after three days he will rise.” If that feels like déjà vu to you who were here last Sunday – yes indeed. The way of betrayal and death for Jesus – and they want to know which one of them is the greatest.

Jesus tries AGAIN ( also déjà vu from last week) – to shift their perspective. “If anyone wants to be first, he must be the very last, and be the servant of all.” It was a variation on the theme from last Sunday’s “– “Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it.” If I may offer another variation – shorter and to the point. Disciples then, disciples now – it’s not about you.

Sometimes, when words won’t do it – you go for the visual. And so Jesus pulled a little child into the disciples’ midst, and into his arms. And here’s where the distance of centuries and culture get in our way of getting the point. This was not a moment when the disciples smiled and said, Awww.. This was a moment when disciples would have dropped their jaws and said “What the?”!! Which is a big leap for us – we who are all about family, who see little children as adorable and worth investing in – at least our own children. Little children in Jesus’ day were a conundrum. They were necessary for the future – to carry on the name, and more importantly to keep the land in the family. But they were a liability in the present, contributing nothing – ranked somewhere between women and slaves. Kept away, kept out on the margins of life that mattered. In other words, the opposite of great. Jesus draws in that kept out, marginalized one and says to greatness seeking disciples, “Whoever welcomes one of these little children welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me does not welcome me but the one who sent me.” You want to great? You want to be close to and connected to God? Then don’t look up aspiring to a front row in the kingdom of heaven – look down and out.

Sometimes, when words won’t do it – you go for the visual. And in visualizing this text, that little child I see held in Jesus’ arms has a red shirt on, and blue shorts and blue and white

sneakers. He is 3 years old. And Jesus gathered him up from the shoreline in Turkey where his lifeless body was lying face down in the water. He is Aylan Kurdi. He drowned, along with his brother and mother, as their family attempted to get from Turkey to Greece, like hundreds of thousands of others fleeing Syria and other places of violence. We hear words about the immigration crisis. But it is easy to keep words away, on the margins. But not that picture. As Douglas Brinkley, at Rice University said, "Once in a while, an image breaks through the noisy cluttered global culture and hits people in the heart and not the head."

Hold that picture in your heart and hear Jesus' words "Whoever welcomes one of these little children welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me does not welcome me but the one who sent me."

Anitra Kitts is a PC(USA) pastor living and working in Munich, connected to an English speaking congregation that has an active ministry with African migrants and asylum seekers. She said this in a recent article in Presbyterian Outlook: "My friends worry about who is arriving in this great stream of humanity. Thieves? Drug addicts? Rapists? Terrorists or terrorist recruiters? But this is what Munich knows: if we want to stop picking the bodies of babies up out of the surf, then we have to offer hospitality to everyone who comes. The time for sorting will come later."

The story is told of a young rabbinical student who asked the rabbi "Rabbi, why don't people see God today as they did in the olden days?" And the wise old man put his hands on the student's shoulder and said, "The answer my son, is because no one is willing to stoop so low."

Stooping low. It's a matter of altitude – and attitude. First of all, stooping means stopping. And then it means changing our position, our posture to meet that person where he or she is. That person who is kept down, kept out, kept on the margins of life. Jesus says to those who want to follow him, and to those tempted to argue over relative greatness, or the right answers or ways of doing things – it's not about you. Welcome them.

Who are they today? Those kept down, kept out, kept away? Unless you are living in a hole in the ground, they are those refugees and migrants – those fleeing for their lives, fleeing for a future. How will we who follow Jesus choose to see them? Can we, will we, see them with eyes of welcome? I am not talking about the problem of how to manage it all. We won't even get to that if we aren't willing to stop, to stoop, to see them as the people they are, the families they are, the 3 year old red shirted children they are.

Who else does our society keep down, keep out, keep away? In a day when youth and vitality is valued, will we stop and stoop and welcome the elderly? When it is easier to turn our heads from something we don't understand, or around which we are uncomfortable, will we stop and stoop, and welcome those with mental illnesses? Will we stop and stoop, and welcome gay and lesbian people who are in fact, my children and grandchild – who are in fact, some of your children and family, neighbors and friends, people kept out of the circle, out on the margins. Will we stop and see and welcome those who struggle with addictions, with poverty, or with pasts they can't undo? How will we live welcome with those who do not look like us, – and so are kept more toward the outside of life? Certainly not with the handcuffs that were put on the non-white wrists of a 14 year old Ahmed Mohamed in Texas, who brought a clock he had designed to school to show his teacher.

Dr. Cari Jackson, writing on this passage on the ON SCRIPTURE blog says this: “By presenting the issue of welcome in response to disciples’ questions about who would be the greatest, Jesus emphasizes the relationship between welcome and greatness. His message is: If you want to be great, you must celebrate and welcome others the most, especially those who can benefit you the least. This kind of welcome is possible only when we see God in others.”

So who are we going to be, as those who claim to follow Jesus? Are we going to be disciples who argue – about who is most faithful, who is doing church the right way? Are we going to be focused on building ourselves up, even building our church up? Or – are we going to remember the visual --- Jesus bringing someone kept out into the disciples midst, into his arms. Are we going to be willing to look beyond our own circle of comfort and familiarity --- to see God in others? That will only happen if, like the rabbi said – we are willing to stoop low enough to those places and people kept down and kept out. Will we stop, will we stoop, will we reach out and welcome, making our circle larger, making our hearts larger, making our faith greater for having done so?

May Jesus’ question, Jesus’ words, and Jesus’ visual --- inspire us all to make an “altitude adjustment”.