

Yr. B, Proper 20
September 20, 2009
Preached by Furman Buchanan
St. Martins in the Fields
1405 words

Lessons:
Psalm 54
Jeremiah 11:18-20
James 3:13-4:3, 7-8a
Mark 9:30-37

They still didn't get it! For a second time, Jesus is predicting his passion and death, and even his closest friends just don't get it!

What if you believed your end was near, and you were trying to get this point across to the people with whom you have your most intimate friendships and family bonds. Now imagine that they are too busy bickering about their own status and position to really listen and understand what you are trying to say. Now you can imagine how Jesus may have felt.

And so Jesus demands, "What were you arguing about?" And the twelve disciples were silent, because they knew they had been fussing over who was the greatest among them.¹

Some things never change.

A little more than a week ago, the Congressman who represents the district which includes this parish, jumped to his feet in the United States House of Representatives and called the President of the United States a liar in the midst of a joint session of Congress. Some believe his behavior was disgraceful. Others believe he took a courageous stand.

So who is the greatest?

The Congressman from South Carolina who apologized to the President, or the President who accepted his apology?

Who is the greatest?

The Congressman who refused to apologize to his colleagues for breaking the rules of the House, or those who passed an admonishing resolution this past week?

Meanwhile, without a single television camera or talk show radio host in sight, another child entered a hospital emergency room this week whose parents are neither citizens nor legal residents of this country. They both work, however, and they pay taxes. The young child was running a high fever, and showed definite symptoms of the swine flu.

The nation is in an uproar about who is the greatest or the most righteous or courageous or honest about excluding illegal immigrants from the health care bill; and virtually no one is asking the question of how to address the moral obligation that doctors, hospitals, and *all of us* have to treat a child who might just be facing an untimely death because of some other pre-existing medical condition.

In fact, virtually no one is even asking the question of whether we should—out of our own selfish interest—treat this child before he comes face to face in the Piggly Wiggly with your children and my children and spreads the epidemic even wider.

¹ Mark 9:33-34

And so Jesus demands, “What were you arguing about?”

And we are silent, because we know we have been fussing over who is the greatest.

Grant us, Lord, not to be anxious about earthly things, but to love things heavenly...²

Earlier this summer our Governor made a total fool out of himself. Most believe his behavior was disgraceful. But some believe he has been picked on unfairly.

So who is the greatest?

The newspaper that broke the story? The Lt. Governor who offered to serve out the Governor’s term without running for that office next year? The First Lady? The House Republicans who have called the Governor to step down? Or the Governor who is *still* the Governor and claims that God is on *his* side?

Meanwhile, without a single television camera or talk show radio host in sight, the 2009 National Kids Count Survey published the ongoing, disgraceful news that our state still ranks near the very bottom of our nation in the key indicators that undeniably reveal that South Carolina doesn’t really value its children with our laws, our policies, our money, or our own personal choices.

Virtually no one is asking the question of why our state’s record when it comes to the health and education of children and teenagers is so consistently poor that we hardly even notice, much less are we provoked to insist upon sweeping and dramatic changes.

And so Jesus demands, “What were you arguing about?”

And we are silent, because we know we have been fussing over who is the greatest.

Grant us, Lord, not to be anxious about earthly things, but to love things heavenly...

The General Convention of the Episcopal Church met this summer in California. There was an extraordinary range of prayer and discussion and debate about how we might be faithful disciples of Jesus Christ in the midst of this volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous world. Much work was done to further our proclamation by word and example about the Good News of Jesus Christ. Much work was done to foster our common commitment to seek and serve Christ in all persons. Much work was done to promote justice and peace, and to respect the dignity of every human being.³

Yet, to listen to the noisy voices at the edges of the debate about human sexuality and the Anglican Communion, the spotlight was shining brightly on who is the greatest.

So who is the greatest?

The Archbishop of Canterbury who attended a portion of the meeting? The Presiding Bishop who exercised calm and thoughtful leadership? Perhaps an African Bishop who sees the United States as a mission field?

Meanwhile, without a single television camera or talk show radio host in sight our Church affirmed and advanced our commitment to the Millennium Development Goals, which involve reaching out to those souls

² These are the opening words from the Collect of the Day.

³ These three descriptions are drawn from the Baptismal Covenant, Book of Common Prayer, p. 305.

who suffer from the most extreme poverty in our world today, like the 11 million children under age five who die every year from a handful of preventable diseases like diarrhea, pneumonia, measles and malnutrition.⁴

And so Jesus demands, “What were you arguing about?”

And we are silent, because we know we have been fussing over who is the greatest.

Grant us, Lord, not to be anxious about earthly things, but to love things heavenly...

We don't have to ask, “What *would* Jesus do?” Because we heard from Mark's Gospel this morning what Jesus *did* do.

He sat down with his disciples and said, “Whoever wants to be *first* must be last of all and servant of all.”⁵

Are we the “last-of-all” kind of disciples or are we paying more attention to who is greatest among us?

Are we the “servant-of-all” kind of disciples or are we paying more attention to who is the greatest among us?

It was quiet for a few uncomfortable moments...and then Jesus took a little child and put it among them; and taking that child into his arms, he said, “Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not (just) me but the one who sent me.”⁶

It doesn't matter what you think of Joe Wilson or Barak Obama or Mark Sanford or Andre' Bauer or the Presiding Bishop or even the Archbishop of Canterbury.

Literally, *that's* what Jesus is trying to get across in today's Gospel—It just doesn't matter what you and I think about who is the greatest. What Jesus is saying to those of us who will be silent and listen...is that what does matter is what you and I think about who is the least important, the least noticeable, the least able to fend for themselves.

Part of what it means to live faithfully is to be attentive. And if we will refocus our attention—as individuals, as families, as a parish, and as the Church—not so much on who is important, and a whole lot more on what is important—then we will more eagerly reach out and respond the way Christ calls us to respond—with our time and our money, with our powerful insistence on justice for the poor, and with a Christ-like response for the least, not the greatest!

So who *is* the least? The least is personified in that child which Jesus held in his arms. The least is personified in a Mexican child living with Swine Flu in S.C. The least is personified in S.C. children who deserve *much more* than a minimally adequate education. The least is personified in millions of African children who die, even though the medicine and food they need is available and affordable.

Whoever welcomes the least such child in Jesus' name welcomes Christ himself. And, ironically, whoever welcomes Christ, welcomes the One who truly *is* the greatest of all: Our Father in heaven, hallowed be *your* name. *Your* kingdom come, *your* will be done on earth just as it is in heaven...for the kingdom *and* the power *and* the glory are yours, now and forever.

Amen.

⁴ This statistic drawn from <http://www.e4gr.org/mdgs/4.html> which outlines the 8 goals of Episcopalians for Global Reconciliation.

⁵ Mark 9:35

⁶ Mark 9:36-37