



## Welcoming All God's Children

Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost || September 22, 2024 || 9:30 am St. Andrew's Episcopal Church, Hanover, MA || Proper 20B || Jeremiah 11:18-20; Psalm 54; James 3:13—4:3, 7-8a; Mark 9:30-37 || The Reverend Amy Whitcomb Slemmer, Esq.

You are here on the perfect Sunday! We have a packed service with some official and unofficial business before us. We are joyfully marking the beginning of the program year, with our Choir in place, our Church school underway and our radical welcome for all being practiced.

There are very difficult events in the world that demand our attention and can draw us away from the love and light of God. I am grateful that our scripture readings assigned for this Sunday run the gamut of human experiences with helpful lessons and reminders for what is expected of us as faithful people striving to make Kindness Loud! Our readings began with the very human pleas of Jeremiah, who reminds God of his own faithfulness and abuse by others in the Hebrew Scriptures and David who begs God for help and proof of his own correctness in Psalm 54 – each seeking God's revenge against their enemies.

We can certainly understand their requests – we may even find ourselves with similar sentiments when something goes catastrophically wrong – “but God, I have been faithful! I go to church EVEN in iffy or bad weather! I don't use swear words! WHAT MORE do I have to do so that you will SMITE my enemies or take my side?!”

You may not seek God's smiting, but perhaps you can IMAGINE asking God to exact revenge or just a smidge of an inconvenience for someone who has crossed you or done you very wrong?

Luckily, we have our Epistle from James. As we've been reading through this book for weeks, the advice from James is consistent – don't just stand there acting pious, we have to DO SOMETHING, and this morning's passage invites us to be drawn into deeper thought and witness. James is talking to a faith community, rooted in God and prescribes a faithful life

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that examines paths taken through the lens of being divinely inspired, or of our own making. Simply put (and not at all simple to implement) – following our own will, or the will of God. If you were distracted while the passage from James was being read, it is worth a recap. God's will is characterized by gentleness born of wisdom, pure, peaceable, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruit without hypocrisy. Our own will is being motivated by envy or selfish ambition.

What a full Sunday! We also have the passage from Mark's gospel that I just proclaimed, with Jesus and the disciples traveling through Galilee hoping to go unnoticed because Jesus has so much to teach the twelve. He again explains – for the second time – what his future holds. He will be persecuted, die and on the third day be resurrected. WHAT? We are treated to another very human response. Not only do the disciples not get it, but when they get to Capernaum and Jesus leaves them alone for a bit, they aren't talking about the revelation or Jesus' teaching. They've got it so backwards that they are actually debating who is the greatest among them.

This passage always evokes a scene of boys on a play ground, sort of kicking dirt at one another, or perhaps shoving each other and mouthing off about who is best or strongest, perhaps smartest, though from this passage, they are each equally clueless. But they are each modeling the selfish ambition about which James just warned.

Jesus knows that they are off on human pursuits and tries again to reframe the conversation by placing a child in their midst. A child, who in biblical times was among the weakest, most vulnerable and dependent creatures imaginable. There were no protections for children, or early childhood education programs. The period of childhood was a waiting period between birth and when they were old enough to work or be productive. I can only imagine what our scriptural ancestors would have said about the whole concept of helicopter parents! Jesus has a powerful and profound teaching moment, centering this defenseless child who has NO ambition.

By centering and honoring this child, he demonstrates that he is not the kind of ruler or leader who is going to smite their enemies. He is not the kind of leader who is going to upend the social structures through force or might. He is the kind of leader who is gentle and loving of babies. He takes that baby in his arms and provides the hands-on lesson to the disciples by showing them who is first. A defenseless, beautiful, baby who can't feed himself, can't provide for his own clothing or living, but is vulnerable and wholly dependent on adults.

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It is a safe bet that the disciples still didn't get it. We know that they didn't want to draw the ire of Jesus and were too afraid to ask questions. That is where the letter from James offers us a glimpse of what our faithful response might be. We are gathered in this faith community, which is for all God's people, checking in with one another about how our own efforts are going to follow Jesus.

Are we engaged in metaphorical dirt kicking to assert our supremacy or firstness, or are we leading from behind, holding others up, making sure that no one is overlooked or lost? Are we praying to God that those who cause harm and havoc will have their own comeuppance, or are we praying for a deeper understanding and a way to love even the most wretched or broken of human beings?

Perfection is not the point here. We know that our attempts to love even the most despicable people pleases God, and can change our hearts – and as Jesus demonstrated with his life – it can change the world!

What we strive for is to be a safe, welcoming, brave place for all. In today's Gospel, the disciples were afraid to share their confusion or to ask their questions which was a missed opportunity to accelerate their own understanding.

The St. Andrew's community welcomes ALL questions, and I hope that you will always feel welcome to bring your gnawing questions or your human conundrums here! This is a community that Makes Kindness Loud, which means that questions, questioning and discernment is expected and welcome. When we don't have the answers, we are a committed community of faith that will pursue divine wisdom together.

It is a joy to have so many of you here today, from so many parts of the history of this storied parish. St. Andrew's was founded in 1725, and I know that it has provided a safe harbor, a peaceful sanctuary and deep and meaningful connections for this community since its inception.

What a joy to have so many of you here this morning! We are a more complete community because you are here, and I hope that you will feel this open invitation to join us – to bring your sorrows, celebrations, conundrums and questions with you every time you visit. At St. Andrew's we make kindness loud and you never need to fit in. You always belong. Amen+

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