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Dear Lord, order our steps in your word. Lead us, guide us, and teach us your will, so that our lives may be full of your wisdom and peace. In our own fear and confusion, grant us courage. Grant us wisdom for the living of these days as your people. Amen.

The theme of the book of James is faith in loving action. Brother James is writing to his church friends about some conflicts they are experiencing. And he reminds them and us today that knowing God will show itself in Christian living. The fruit of faith will show in how we conduct our lives in wisdom and peace.

So hear now a word from the Lord.

James 3:13 - 4:3, 7-8a

3:13 Who is wise and understanding among you? Show by your good life that your works are done with gentleness born of wisdom.

3:14 But if you have bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not be boastful and false to the truth.

3:15 Such wisdom does not come down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, devilish.

3:16 For where there is envy and selfish ambition, there will also be disorder and wickedness of every kind.

3:17 But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy.

3:18 And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace for those who make peace.

4:1 Those conflicts and disputes among you, where do they come from? Do they not come from your cravings that are at war within you?

4:2 You want something and do not have it; so you commit murder. And you covet something and cannot obtain it; so you engage in disputes and conflicts. You do not have, because you do not ask.

4:3 You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, in order to spend what you get on your pleasures.

4:7 Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you.

4:8 Draw near to God, and God will draw near to you.

Now we turn to the gospel reading from Mark. Jesus and his disciples are on their way. Jesus has just revealed that he will suffer and die, then be raised again by God. They are not getting it- at all. The gospels were not great marketing for the disciples since they often seem like block heads, but maybe we can relate! We do not always understand God's ways.

Mark 9:30-37

9:30 They went on from there and passed through Galilee. Jesus did not want anyone to know it;

9:31 for he was teaching his disciples, saying to them, "The Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him, and three days after being killed, he will rise again."

9:32 But they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask Jesus.

9:33 Then they came to Capernaum; and when he was in the house Jesus asked them, "What were you arguing about on the way?"

9:34 But they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another who was the greatest.

9:35 He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all."

9:36 Then he took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms, he said to them,

9:37 "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me."

Proclamation of the Word

I never cease being surprised at what people will do to be great? to win, achieve, succeed at any cost.

The disciples did it, too. When Jesus speaks to them, they are silent, for they had been arguing over who was the greatest. Arguing and conflicts, we see plenty of ways that causes disorder in our world.

Today Jesus teaches us, "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all."

In talking with my teacher husband Chuck, I learned that he just did an experiment with his AP Environmental students that proves that people will do anything to get more for them sometimes. So hang in there with me for a minute as we Science nerd out! He read in National Geographic about a professor who proved an idea called the Tragedy of the Commonsⁱ to his class. (I know you are jealous at how exciting things get at the Conrad house)

The idea suggests that the common space we share- land for grazing, oceans for fishing, or even the office, dorm, or church fridge, will be exploited by some who take too much, leaving nothing for the rest of us. God calls that the sin of greed. James calls it envy and selfish ambition. A current concern, for instance, would be rights to rivers and water resources like how SC, NC, and GA have conflicts over water supplies that supports our population.

So on his last test, Chuck simulated the idea of The Tragedy of the Commons. In one question he offered them two choices:

- A. Take six points to be added to your final test grade. or...
- B. Take two points to be added to your final test grade.

The caveat was if more than 10% of the class chooses six points, then no students receive any points.

The results: no one got any extra points because more than 10% of them chose option A!! Call that greed or envy or selfish ambition. Whatever we call it, everyone loses.

People will do anything to be the greatest, even at the expense of others. So the disciples are showing their unbecoming human side in today's text, but they are not that different from us, are they?

They were looking for a King, and Jesus was a king they did not recognize. Jesus explains to them that he will submit to being crucified and die in order to reveal God's true love in a death on a cross. Then rise again and be glorified. Now that's greatness. He then has a come to Jesus meeting with them.

So what is Jesus trying to teach us, his disciples today?

That he came to serve in the power of love for all- especially those whom the world treats as nobodies.

Sometimes we think of serving as something weak or only for those in low positions. So he takes a child in his arms to demonstrate.

Children were the lowliest in Jesus' culture. They had no value, no rights. Jesus says the way we welcome a child, a person of little value, is how we welcome Jesus. The last shall be first and the first last in the kingdom of God.

Now sometimes we think of servant hood as weakness, but look at the one who is saying this audacious thing. Jesus was no push-over. Time and again he stood up to the religious leaders, sometimes with cutting remarks and fierce judgments. Jesus had no problem with telling the truth. He called the scribes and Pharisees hypocrites. He emptied the temple on a rampage to call us back to focus on true worship of God.

So, taking the last place and being a servant of all is not being a doormat. Servant hood takes more strength than weakness. Or I like the way James describes it is "gentleness born of wisdom."

I think the attitude of servant hood is the mark of a person who knows who he or she is. Such a person is not ignorant of their worth, but knows their true worth. As our teachers and youth advisors teach our youth, each of you is a child of God, beloved and cherished.

Servant hood then comes from the heart of a person who knows he is loved and valued, who is deeply aware of his identity as a child of God. And as an extension, is aware of the value of others- all God's children, especially the ones the world treats as nobodies.

**So the more we become identified with Jesus Christ and sure of God's love, the more we will be able to drop the pretense of greatness and assume the role of servant.ⁱⁱ
(Repeat).**

Or as James describes it, the more we draw near to God, the more God will give us the gifts of understanding, peace, and gentleness born of wisdom.

I saw this kind of witness demonstrated this week by Deshaun Watson. We know Deshaun to not only be an outstanding quarterback, but a man of integrity and faith. This week a Texas school superintendent made comments which he believed were private about the team losing because of Deshaun being a black quarterback as I understand it.

While the superintendent's true character was revealed publically, so was Deshaun's. When asked in a press conference about the man's comments, Deshaun said, "That's on him. May peace be with him."

In response to the question of racism, Deshaun spoke with dignity, "That's everyday life. I'm all about love. I love all people, and that's what I focus on."

His response was a gentleness born of wisdom. Wisdom is cultivated in people who love and serve God. Wisdom is demonstrated in the way we speak, act, and treat others, especially the vulnerable children of God.

According to Proverbs 9:10 "To be wise we must first have reverence for the Lord."

Or as I learned the verse, "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom."

James describes it this way, "But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy. And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace for those who make peace."
(James 3:17-18)

Deshaun knows who and whose he is really is.

Not to buy into the cult worship of our sports stars, but to make the point that what he did glorified God. From what I witness he walks with Jesus.

He follows the One who serves and submits to the highest power.
That takes courage and strength, wisdom and peace.
There was no selfish ambition or envy, which according to James results in disputes and conflicts. The superintendent showed his ignorance and caused conflict.
Deshaun offered God's gift of peace in return.
And we witnessed true greatness-
understanding, humility, and gentleness born of wisdom.

When we all seek greatness, we see what happens like in the tragedy of the commons or in Mr. Conrad's class experiment.
Nobody wins. We all lose.

Jesus shows us the way of life.
We must be servants who seek first the kingdom of God.

Now wouldn't that be great?

ⁱ Garret Harden is the scientist who proved this theory. See www.britannica.com/science/tragedy-of-the-commons

ⁱⁱ Thanks to Leonard Vander Zee at Center for Excellence in Preaching for his contributions on these reflections on Jesus and servant-hood.