

Sunday, September 19, 2021

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

Mark 9:30-37

A Harvest of Righteousness, A Welcome for Peace
A sermon by Rev. Dawn Allen-Herron,
with the People of St. Mary's Episcopal Church, Anchorage

"And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace for those who make peace."

I am certain that I have read this line before,
but not until this week has it captured my imagination.

- Wisdom
- Gentleness
- Truthful
- Harmony
- Pure
- Willing to yield
- Full of mercy
- Producing good fruit
- Absence of hypocrisy
- impartial

It's clear that the disciples were not making peace.

Let's look at the Gospel text more carefully,

paying particular attention to where Mark's story differs from Matthew's and Luke's.

The disciples had been arguing, and they were probably NOT arguing about who the greatest football player was,

or who the best person to consult for pandemic protocols is,
or thousand other things that we might quarrel about.

Perhaps, in client/patron society such as theirs,

*they squabbled about who the most advantageous patron was,
or who the best client that they could procure was....*

Maybe it *was* about who the greatest among them was....

But clearly, they were not debating the best methods for making peace.

The harvest of righteousness, sown in peace, was not on the forefront of their minds.

How do you resolve disputes?

When folx near you—folx you love—are in conflict,

what do you do to help them come to peace?

What tactics do you use to make peace?

We asked this question of each other at a gathering of pastor/preachers this week *before* we read the text.

Our answers were mostly about affirming the value/belovedness of each person,

About acknowledging that each person's viewpoint is important, etc....

But this is NOT what Jesus does.

Instead, Jesus put a child in the middle of their circle, and took the child into his own arms.

Here is another place where we may be tempted to compress other Gospel accounts into this one. But it is different.

Matthew and Luke, who likely had Mark's account on hand before writing their own account, have Jesus saying, "whoever *receives* a child...receives me..."¹

No doubt you've heard a number of times a number of important points about the CHILD in ancient culture, and in ours.

¹ Matthew 18:5; Luke 9:48.

We may think first of all of children as tender, keenly tuned to awe, curious, and charmingly naïve. We also recognize their vulnerability, and their inability to provide for themselves everything that they need.

No doubt these things are true now, and were true in the Ancient Near East, as well.

But, more important for the culture of Jesus and the disciples (client/patron society)—

children had nothing to offer.

In a world in which virtually every encounter was evaluated based upon who gained or lost honor and prestige, children brought nothing to the relationship.

All of the Gospel writers understood this.

And yet Mark (believed to be the earliest Gospel), is slightly different, and the difference seems important.

Mark says that “whoever *welcomes* a child...welcomes me...”

Receiving and welcoming are different, aren't they?

I think of that almost every day that I work from our church buildings, these days.

Because of the pandemic, our building is locked.

We still *receive* whomever comes to the door, and I like to think that we receive them with dignity and compassion.

But locked doors aren't really a *welcome*, are they?

And there are many, many other ways—small and large—that we do this.

Person seated in our row on a plane

The answer Jesus gives to the disciples' concern over who was greatest
is to put a vulnerable one
who seems to have nothing to offer,
in the center of the circle,
and implores us to offer this one hospitality.

I love hospitality.

I love cleaning the house, imagining the expected guest in this space.

I love planning the food we will share,

The places we will go,

The activities that we will do together.

All of these otherwise mundane tasks become a way that extends a guest's visit into
the time BEFORE they arrive.

This is *welcoming*.

Henri Nouwen has written extensively about hospitality, and his ideas are helpful
here, to me....

*Hospitality means primarily the **creation of a free space** where the stranger
can enter and become a friend ... Hospitality is not to change people but
to offer them space where change can take place. The paradox of
hospitality is that it wants to create emptiness, not a fearful emptiness, but a
friendly emptiness where strangers can **enter and discover themselves as
created free;***

free to sing their own songs,

speaking their own languages,

dancing their own dances;

free also to leave and follow their own vocations.

Hospitality is not a subtle invitation to adore the lifestyle of the host, but the gift of a chance for the guest to find his own.²

How can we make peace?

Jesus invites us to a way of making peace that does more than receiving a stranger.

Instead, we are called to welcome the other—particularly those who need us, and to place them into the center of our circle.

Here, they will have the space to grow and flourish and change, and, certainly, we too will be changed.

Here, my friends, we will find the Harvest of Righteousness, sown in peace.

May we, together, enjoy its bounty.

Now to God—

God who creates all we know

God who comes to us, and welcomes us

God who gives us courage to live in this way

Be honor and glory forever.

² From <https://henrinouwen.org/meditation/hospitality/>, accessed September 15, 2021.