

Sunday, September 19, 2021 – Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost

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Introduction

Today we hear James warn against selfish ambition, while the disciples quarrel over which one of them is the greatest. Jesus tells them the way to be great is to serve. Then, to make it concrete, he puts in front of them a flesh-and-blood child. We are called to welcome the children God puts in front of us, to make room for them in daily interaction, and to give them a place of honor in the assembly.

Prayer of the Day

O God, our teacher and guide, you draw us to yourself and welcome us as beloved children. Help us to lay aside all envy and selfish ambition, that we may walk in your ways of wisdom and understanding as servants of your Son, Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. **Amen.**

First Reading: Wisdom 1:16--2:1, 12-22

Dating from shortly before the time of Christ, the Wisdom of Solomon is a piece of Jewish wisdom literature. This reading portrays the ungodly planning the downfall of the righteous person. The ungodly are allied with death, and they do not know that God gives eternal life to the righteous.

¹⁶The ungodly by their words and deeds summoned death;
considering him a friend, they pined away
and made a covenant with him,
because they are fit to belong to his company.

^{2:1}For they reasoned unsoundly, saying to themselves,
“Short and sorrowful is our life,
and there is no remedy when a life comes to its end,
and no one has been known to return from Hades.

¹²“Let us lie in wait for the righteous man,
because he is inconvenient to us and opposes our actions;
he reproaches us for sins against the law,
and accuses us of sins against our training.

¹³He professes to have knowledge of God,
and calls himself a child of the Lord.

¹⁴He became to us a reproof of our thoughts;

¹⁵the very sight of him is a burden to us,
because his manner of life is unlike that of others,
and his ways are strange.

¹⁶We are considered by him as something base,
and he avoids our ways as unclean;
he calls the last end of the righteous happy,
and boasts that God is his father.

¹⁷Let us see if his words are true,
and let us test what will happen at the end of his life;

¹⁸for if the righteous man is God's child, he will help him,
and will deliver him from the hand of his adversaries.

¹⁹Let us test him with insult and torture,
so that we may find out how gentle he is,
and make trial of his forbearance.

²⁰Let us condemn him to a shameful death,
for, according to what he says, he will be protected."

²¹Thus they reasoned, but they were led astray,
for their wickedness blinded them,

²²and they did not know the secret purposes of God,
nor hoped for the wages of holiness,
nor discerned the prize for blameless souls.

Psalm 1

¹Happy are they who have not walked in the counsel | of the wicked,
nor lingered in the way of sinners, nor sat in the seats | of the scornful!

²**Their delight is in the law | of the LORD,
and they meditate on God's teaching | day and night.**

³They are like trees planted by streams of water, bearing fruit in due season, with leaves
that | do not wither; everything they | do shall prosper.

⁴**It is not so | with the wicked;
they are like chaff which the wind | blows away.**

⁵Therefore the wicked shall not stand upright when | judgment comes,
nor the sinner in the council | of the righteous.

⁶**For the LORD knows the way | of the righteous,
but the way of the wicked shall | be destroyed.**

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

The wisdom God gives unites our hearts and minds. Instead of living to satisfy our own wants and desires, we manifest this wisdom in peace, gentleness, mercy, and impartiality toward others.

¹³Who is wise and understanding among you? Show by your good life that your works are done with gentleness born of wisdom. ¹⁴But if you have bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not be boastful and false to the truth. ¹⁵Such wisdom does not come down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, devilish. ¹⁶For where there is envy and selfish ambition, there will also be disorder and wickedness of every kind. ¹⁷But 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. ¹⁸And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace for those who make peace.^{4:}

¹Those conflicts and disputes among you, where do they come from? Do they not come from your cravings that are at war within you? ²You 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. ³You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, in order to spend what you get on your pleasures. ⁷Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. ^{8a}Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you.

Gospel Reading: Mark 9:30-37

Jesus' teaching and action in this text are directed to the church whenever it is seduced by the world's definition of greatness: prestige, power, influence, and money. The antidote to such a concern for greatness is servanthood.

³⁰[Jesus and the disciples went on] and passed through Galilee. He did not want anyone to know it;³¹for 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."

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

³³Then they came to Capernaum; and when he was in the house he asked them, "What were you arguing about on the way?" ³⁴But they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another who was the greatest. ³⁵He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all." ³⁶Then he took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms, he said to them, ³⁷"Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me."

Prayers of Intercession

Made children and heirs of God's promise, we pray for the church, the world, and all in need, saying "God in your mercy," and responding, "hear our prayer."

A brief silence.

God of community, we pray for the church around the world. Unite us in our love for you. Help us overcome our divisions, that we are encouraged to work together for your sake. God, in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

God of creation, we pray for this hurting earth. Awaken in us a new desire to care for this world and empower us to support agencies, organizations, and individual efforts to heal our environment. God, in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

God of cooperation, we pray for nations of the world embroiled in conflict. Inspire leaders to listen to each other and work towards peaceful solutions to disagreements. Protect the vulnerable, especially children, who cannot find safety in their home or country. God, in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

God of comfort, we pray for all who live with mental or physical illness. Help them find appropriate care. Bring healing and wholeness when the path forward seems bleak. God, in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

God of compassion, we pray for the young people of this congregation. Renew in us your call to welcome the children in our midst. As they grow, strengthen their faith and our commitment to them. God, in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

God of consolation, we give you thanks for our loved ones who have died and pray for all who grieve today. Shine your grace on all your saints. God, in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

Receive these prayers, O God, and those in our hearts known only to you; through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.

A reflection for the Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost...

The Most Challenging Spiritual Practice

The writers of today's readings express to God their fears about death and those who do evil. They rage against the cravings, coveting, envy, and selfish ambition that lead to disorder and war, within and around us. They describe one caught in this reality who is led to slaughter, tested with insult and torture, and faces a shameful death. Through our lenses we see Jesus. In fact, Jesus keeps describing what is going to happen to him, but his followers can't understand. They don't want to understand. Instead, they argue about who is greatest. Putting a quick end to that line of argument, Jesus brings a child into their circle. Embracing the child, Jesus invites disciples into humble service—this is how we draw near to God and God to us.

It is easy to be fearful in view of events outside us. It is easy to be thrown off course by feelings inside us or to work hardest for the wrong things. But Jesus invites us to practice what may be the most challenging spiritual practice of all. Jesus invites us to love our neighbor. Jesus asks that we look around for someone concrete to invest our time and energy in, someone who cannot necessarily return the favor. Jesus challenges us to receive others' ministry to us, since we are also little children in faith.

In real life, there is no way to avoid shame and death. At some point, it comes to each of us. However, for now, wherever we are, we can participate in God's way of life. Empowered by the Holy Spirit, disciples look where Jesus points and see those whom they can serve. They do not escape death but can know that resurrection is on the other side. Each day, God is with us through dying and rising.

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