

Sunday, September 22, 2024 – Eighteenth 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: Proverbs 31:10-31

¹⁰A capable wife who can find?

She is far more precious than jewels.

¹¹The heart of her husband trusts in her,
and he will have no lack of gain.

¹²She does him good, and not harm,
all the days of her life.

¹³She seeks wool and flax,
and works with willing hands.

¹⁴She is like the ships of the merchant,
she brings her food from far away.

¹⁵She rises while it is still night
and provides food for her household
and tasks for her servant-girls.

¹⁶She considers a field and buys it;
with the fruit of her hands she plants a vineyard.

¹⁷She girds herself with strength,
and makes her arms strong.

¹⁸She perceives that her merchandise is profitable.
Her lamp does not go out at night.

¹⁹She puts her hands to the distaff,
and her hands hold the spindle.

²⁰She opens her hand to the poor,
and reaches out her hands to the needy.

²¹She is not afraid for her household when it snows,

for all her household are clothed in crimson.
²²She makes herself coverings;
her clothing is fine linen and purple.
²³Her husband is known in the city gates,
taking his seat among the elders of the land.
²⁴She makes linen garments and sells them;
she supplies the merchant with sashes.
²⁵Strength and dignity are her clothing,
and she laughs at the time to come.
²⁶She opens her mouth with wisdom,
and the teaching of kindness is on her tongue.
²⁷She looks well to the ways of her household,
and does not eat the bread of idleness.
²⁸Her children rise up and call her happy;
her husband too, and he praises her:
²⁹“Many women have done excellently,
but you surpass them all.”
³⁰Charm is deceitful, and beauty is vain,
but a woman who fears the LORD is to be praised.
³¹Give her a share in the fruit of her hands,
and let her works praise her in the city gates.

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

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: Mark 9:30-37

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

Drawn together in the power of the Holy Spirit, we pray with confidence for the church, God's good creation, and all who are in need.

A brief silence.

Loving God, you welcome all at your table of grace. Instill in your church a spirit of humility and curiosity, that we embrace all who seek you. We pray especially for ministries of hospitality and faith formation. Hear us, O God. **Your mercy is great.**

Creating God, you shape the world so there is more than enough for all. Curb our habits of overuse, and guide us toward more sustainable sources of energy, food, and water. Hear us, O God. **Your mercy is great.**

Gracious God, your peace brings justice and solidarity. Encourage peace among peoples, tribes, and nations; heal divisions in our country and local communities, that together we might cooperate for the good of all. Hear us, O God. **Your mercy is great.**

Faithful God, you draw near to you all who are in need. Bring healing and wholeness to all who suffer. Transform economic, political, and social systems that oppress vulnerable people, especially systems of structural racism and generational poverty. Hear us, O God. **Your mercy is great.**

Transforming God, you accompany all through changes and transitions. Help us to see where you are calling this community to new ways of living the gospel promise; assure us that even as change brings loss, it also brings hope and life. Hear us, O God. **Your mercy is great.**

Merciful God, you embrace us on our final pilgrimage from this life. Accompany all who have died, console those who mourn, and at the last, show us the way to eternal life in you. Hear us, O God. **Your mercy is great.**

We entrust these and all our prayers to you, holy God, in the name of your beloved child, Jesus Christ, our Savior.

Amen.

A reflection for this eighteenth 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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