

I would hope that at least a ‘few’ of you will recall that last week’s message had an LSU sports ‘flavor’ to it. So, just to allay any concerns, today’s sermon does NOT have such a focus on sports. The sermon title does NOT refer to the drastic change in performance for the LSU football team from its National Championship season to the dismal results of the following year... where, from one season to the next, they basically went from “First to Last.”

Today we will begin a series entitled “Words of Jesus.” This is not to say that all of the other messages I have preached have NOT concerned what Jesus has had to say to us through His Written Word. But as we begin this new chapter in the church’s life... a time when we hope to welcome new people into our midst... we will encounter folks who, in perhaps many cases, have had bad experiences with ‘good church members.’ (We should always remember what Jesus said about ‘good’? ‘Who is good? No one is good but God.’). Sometimes those bad experiences might have even been with the PASTOR. (Yes, hard to believe...)

And so, I wanted to start this journey off ‘on the right foot,’ so-to-speak. That as we consider how to conduct our ministry in this new mission field, we go to the One who is the true ‘Head of the Church.’ NOT me! Jesus Christ. To be mindful of who is our best example of how to fulfill our mission statement to **“Know Christ and Make Christ Known”**: CHRIST Himself! That in our efforts to move from the **brokenness** of this world toward the wholeness of what began as **God’s perfect creation**, it will ONLY be through the life, and words, of Jesus. NOT merely our own...

As we begin today’s story, Jesus and his disciples (and one could assume, some other followers who were walking with them) are approaching the town of Capernaum. (Now, for your ‘Bible trivia pleasure,’ Capernaum is a small fishing village on the Sea of Galilee, and in the Hebrew means “Village of Comfort.” Which would be quite appropriate, as Jesus spent much time teaching and healing here... bringing ‘comfort.’ One reason that he may have frequented this town is that in it there is a house there, later turned into a church by the Byzantines, which is believed to have been the home of Jesus’ ‘right hand man,’ ‘the Rock,’ aka Peter.)

Regardless, on the road Jesus asks his disciples, **“What were you arguing about on the way?”** (Mk. 9:33) Which I had to chuckle at. Do you not think that this was more of a ‘rhetorical’ question? Do we not believe that the Son of God already KNEW the answer before he asked? Like most all of his questions... Not too unlike our prayer requests. God KNOWS our every need... and yet, we must still articulate them. Prayer is not simply about God’s ability to answer... but also, our ‘response-ability’ to ASK...

At any rate, the next verse says **“But they were silent, for... they had argued with one another who was the greatest.”** Here an image comes to mind of young children who have gotten caught misbehaving by their dad, and no one wants to say anything because they’re too **embarrassed**. I can just envision the disciples hanging their heads, glancing at each other, afraid to speak. As well they SHOULD have been...

And then, in good parental fashion, we go on to read that **“He sat down”** (like in his ‘easy chair’) ... **“called the twelve”** (‘kids, come here’) ... and imparted to them that wisdom as from the Father... THE Father: **“Whoever wants to be first must be the last of all, and servant of all.”** (Mt. 9:35) ‘Whoever wants to be the greatest among you must be the least. If you would like to be held in the highest regards... you must regard yourself as the lowest.’

And then, do you remember what he does next? He takes **“a little child and put it among them.”** It doesn’t say if it was a boy or a girl... **it doesn’t matter**. It just says ‘a little child.’ Some believe an infant. Perhaps a toddler. It being a ‘little child’ says that this was someone who would have fulfilled that ‘last of all’ criteria. Jesus does his usual masterful job of ‘sermon illustration.’ In this case, using a young child as an illustration that would be easily understood by an adult audience. Hmmm... like a children’s message in worship... (I think that I have told you that I got my first ‘big break’ in ‘preaching God’s Word’ by doing Children’s Times. Adults would come up to me after the service to say how much they appreciated the kid’s ‘story time.’ Which I always appreciated, but hoped that the ones to whom it was actually DIRECTED got something out of it. But it did remind me that sometimes, ‘the simpler the better’...)

For me, Jesus is telling us, his disciples TODAY, that if we truly want to be the greatest in God’s eyes... or, in one another’s eyes, for that matter... we must demonstrate how we put others ahead of ourselves. How we consider ourselves to be the LEAST important. Do we care for our

children... not just our own biological ones, but ALL children... the way that we should? And as they were in Jesus' time, those young, sometimes 'insignificant' children represent ALL who are marginalized, overlooked, and might feel as though they don't matter. For no matter the age, we are ALL 'God's children,' AMEN? But do you think that everyone feels like a 'beautiful, wonderful child of God'? HECK NO! There may be some in this very room who don't feel so 'beautiful,' so 'wonderful.' And as much as that school program "*No Child left behind*" should be taken to heart for EDUCATION, so too should you and I feel that way about God's 'grown up' children as well. That NO ONE feel 'left behind' in a world that 'passes by' far too many. And that we must not forget that whenever we 'welcome' a child, young or old, in Christ's name, we are welcoming CHRIST Himself. And His DAD. When we look into the eyes of another, we are looking in the eyes of Jesus.

So, HOW DO WE DO THAT? How do we put others first? How do we do a better job of 'welcoming' those children of God who cross our paths each day? How do we demonstrate the wisdom of God in our interactions with others? Well, Jesus' brother James, in answering the question of "*Who is wise and understanding among you?*", says that we are to "***Show by your good life that your works are done with gentleness ("HUMILITY") born of wisdom.***"

"Show by your good life... works done with gentleness." In that ongoing message we continue to build on from last week, "***Faith with works is dead faith.***" Our actions speak louder than our words. Now for us Presbyterians, we need to work on our ability to, as we tell our kids, "Use your words." In general we struggle mightily in articulating our faith. It is to that end that your church leadership has made a commitment to the '3 Circles' Presentation of the Gospel. As a whole, we ALL need to become more comfortable with TALKING about our Christian faith.

But that being said, there is perhaps nothing more damaging to our Christian witness (aside from 'grumpiness') than our actions don't LIVE UP to what we SAY we believe. If we are to display that "***wisdom from above***" that James speaks of, we must bear "***good fruits***"... lives that are "***without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy.***" The most frequent, and condemning, criticism of 'practitioners' of the Christian faith is that of "hypocrisy." If we are to be 'standard bearers' for Christ, not ashamed of the Gospel, then our behavior must be consistent with our proclaimed identity.

There were 3 words that stood out for me in James' description of Wisdom that is 'from above'... Godly... Christ-like. They were: **"Peaceable."** **"Gentle/Considerate."** **"Willing to Yield/Submissive."** (NRSV/NIV) And as I look at these words [repeat], I would ask each one of you to consider how they apply to YOUR life. I certainly did for mine.

"Peaceable." Now, I consider myself a fairly 'peaceable' guy. I know, behind the steering wheel, I'm trying to work on... we all have our crosses to bear. But that aside, even I can at times allow myself to react too quickly to what someone says (either spoken or written), and can say something I regret later. Like to my wife, or friend, or church-member. Just a few days ago I read a text that immediately elicited feelings of frustration. And I was about to shoot back a snarky response when I thought better of it. I decided to wait until I could speak to the person directly, face-to-face. And what had been an issue initially soon became a non-issue... AFTER taking the path of PEACE, rather than the road of PRIDE or PETTYNESS.

The next is **"Gentle/Considerate."** I like this one because of the word 'CONSIDER.' As in 'consider the **alternatives.**' As in 'consider his **opinions.**' Or, 'consider her **feelings.**' How often do we truly 'consider' the other person's point of view in a conversation? *Particularly* when it comes to POLITICS. Or HEALTHCARE. (TOO intertwined these days!) We all have encountered those who aren't at all interested in hearing what your perspective is. That as you speak, they are just working on how to defend their position.

How many of you remember the elementary school program "The Leader in Me?" It is based on Steven Covey "7 Habits of Highly Effective People." The one that has always stood out most for me is "Seek FIRST to understand, and THEN to be understood." Now THERE'S a novel concept. First trying to understand the other person's point-of-view before communicating our own. I believe our whole nation could use this program... starting with our state and federal legislatures...

The final one is to be **"Willing to Yield/Submissive."** This one is even harder than the previous one. To 'consider' the other's situation or viewpoint is one thing... to actually 'give up' some of your own position is a whole other one. For far too many, the word 'compromise' is equivalent to the word 'defeat.' And yet, if we must always put our own interests ahead of others, it can often lead to 'gridlock'... in more ways than one.

Our son Chandler was talking about the traffic situation in BR when so much of the city was without power after Hurricane Ida. With many intersections with no working signal, it was up to the motorists to regulate the flow through them. And when drivers would not abide by the practice of 'yielding' to the car to the right, only concerned about their own passage, everybody would suffer. Putting the other person *first* can sometimes keep one from being *last*... as in, the 'last' to get home! Being an individual 'servant' to others, in effect, 'serves' the collective good of ALL.

Later this afternoon we will have our first opportunity to get to meet some of our neighbors in the Crest subdivision. A large part of our Open House will be focused on how we can best 'serve' their needs. Yesterday a group of 10 of your fellow 'field hands' came to put up door hangers telling the residents of today's meeting. As you won't find surprising, there were a number of 'leaders' in this group. And I don't just mean 'church leaders.' Attorneys. Community and Business leaders. Healthcare. Sales backgrounds. Teachers. All accustomed to having to be 'in charge.' And yet, as we were going about our business in the neighborhood, the comment was made that often the problem with a group like this is that there are *"Too many chiefs, and not enough Indians."* But on this day, we had a great many more 'indians' than 'chiefs.' And together, we canvassed that neighborhood of over 150 homes in less than 30 minutes...

So, on this day, maybe we 'got it'... we understood a little bit about what it means to be a 'servant of all.' Let us work, and pray... beginning this afternoon... for the opportunity to 'welcome children' ... and adults... in the name of Christ to this place. As we strive to be 'peaceable'... 'considerate'... and 'willing to yield'...

We will 'show by our good life' the Christian faith that sustains us. May we daily show ourselves to be servants of the living God... from first to last...

CHARGE: Go out into the world endeavoring to be the **last of all** and the **servant of all**.

Welcome the children, for in doing so, you welcome Jesus.

Submit yourselves to God, resist all evil;

draw near to God, and God will draw near to you.