

I learned to love a poem by the famed 20th C. playwright Tennessee Williams when I was in my 20s. Williams, who was both tremendously gifted and a rather troubled soul, experienced the oppressive sense that the world was increasingly loud, bombastic, and coarse, and that much that was beautiful, refined, and gentle was being destroyed. In his poem, “Lament for a Moth”, he wrote, “A plague has stricken the moths; the moths are dying. Their bodies flakes of bronze on the carpet lying. Enemies of the delicate everywhere have breathed a pestilent mist into the air. Give them, O Mother of moths and Mother of men, strength to enter the heavy world again. For delicate were the moths and badly wanted, here in a world by mammoth figures haunted.” Here in a world by mammoth figures haunted....sound a little familiar?

Possibly some of us can relate to this feeling of a world that is aggressive, overwhelming, sharp-edged, and haunted by mammoth figures. We might also grieve that some of what we have valued that is simple, delicate, and gentle is being shut out by all the noise and posturing of an election season, by a world full of people that cannot get along, by a competitive and unforgiving society where it only seems to matter that you come out on top. If so, we may find some sense of respite and reassurance in our lessons today, which feature *gentleness*, of all things----a quality that seems in short supply in the world at present. James mentions gentleness twice—writing, “Show by your good life that your works are done with *gentleness*.” And he describes wisdom as being “peaceable and *gentle*”. Jesus doesn’t use the actual word of “gentleness”, but he performs a gentle action that is nonetheless bold and significant within His context: He takes a little child up in His arms, a gentle and loving kind of thing to do. In fact, the next time I feel like shutting out an obnoxiously loud and arrogant world, I may try to picture in my mind Jesus taking a child in His arms and hold on to that thought instead. What a healing contrast that provides. *Why is the world so edgy, angry, and loud?* Let’s explore what our Gospel lesson has to say about this.

All of us have good days and bad days, right? Days when we live out the best version of ourselves; when we are gracious, giving, cheerful, and faithful. And days when we live out the worst version of ourselves; when we are petty, irritable, filled with doubt about everything, and itching for a fight. In this political season,

we have the opportunity to catch glimpses of our candidates on *precisely* these two kinds of days: their own promotional ads of course show them at their best; the publicity put out by their opponents invariably show them at their worst. When I see these things, I feel profoundly grateful that I'm not running for public office. You and I would hope that if we are to be remembered by posterity, they'd remember us kindly, as we are on our good days.

The brutal reality is that history is not always kind that way, and our gospel lesson today is a case in point. Jesus' disciples had undoubtedly many good days, days when they selflessly ministered to those around them. But, wouldn't you know it, this particular day that is captured for eternity in the Holy Scriptures was *not* one of those days. The Gospel of Mark is an honest chronicle, and we see the disciples in today's text, if not at their *worst*, *certainly* not at their *best*.

To set the context, just prior to these verses in Mark 9, the disciples had tried unsuccessfully to perform an exorcism and healing for a boy with convulsions. It was left to Jesus to cast out the demon and heal the unfortunate boy. When the disciples ask him afterwards why *he* succeeded where *they* failed, Jesus indicates they had approached the situation with insufficient prayer. So, in point of fact, the disciples had just experienced a failure and a bit of a rebuke. We know how that feels; it doesn't feel good. It makes us feel a little defensive, like we've got something to prove. This helps explain what happens in our text today.

The glimpse of the conversation that we catch between Jesus and his disciples in our text seems odd. Jesus begins by telling his disciples that he will be betrayed, killed, and rise again. Surely that's a fairly shocking piece of news; we'd expect some kind of response from the disciples, wouldn't we? After all, they are his closest friends. We'd anticipate a reaction of dismay or horror or *something*-- but, *no*, that's not what happens. We read, "They did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him."

That particular verse is easily overlooked, but let's unpack its meaning for a moment. First of all, they didn't understand him. Why not? He says that he will be betrayed, killed, and rise again. Quite clearly laid out, I'd say. So, it's not so much that they didn't understand his words, or that they found him obscure---it's that what he said didn't match up with their *expectations*. They didn't understand him, because his agenda

differed from *their* agenda. In the previous chapter of Mark, Peter confesses his faith in Jesus as the Messiah, the Christ. So, there is a growing understanding of Jesus' messianic identity among these disciples. But, they have a traditional view of what the messiah will do: he will liberate Israel from foreign occupation and restore her to a glory that befits God's chosen people. That's *their* agenda. Their agenda includes nothing at all about the messiah suffering or dying, and quite naturally, the notion of the dead rising again isn't in their plans either. There's a disconnect between their expectations *and* the reality of how Jesus will live out the role of Messiah—that's what causes them to not understand. Moreover, what Jesus says sounds pretty grim, and they likely *didn't want* to understand Him. But that being the case, and as they were experiencing confusion, why didn't they ask about it? Our text states, "they did not understand and *were afraid to ask him.*" What's that about?

Why are the disciples afraid to ask what Jesus meant? Could their recent failure to exorcise and heal the young boy be at play here? They had just failed at *exorcism* 101; maybe the last thing any of them wanted to do was now fail *discipleship* 101. Maybe they just didn't want to be the one to look dumb or lose face by admitting they didn't get it. How many times have we done the same, sat silent rather than reveal our ignorance or confusion by asking the question that needs to be asked? Is saving face worth not asking a question that needs to be asked? Probably not, but I think a lot of us, including me, fall into this category rather often.

And of course, maybe they didn't want to ask the hard question, because they were afraid of what the answer would be. If the answer involved hearing more about suffering and death, they didn't want to know. They'd rather live in blissful ignorance, or at least in a semi-blissful state of confusion. I think we understand this, too. Takes a lot of courage to ask a hard question when we dread and fear getting a hard answer in response. The disciples don't *want* to hear that being Messiah, and by implication, being a disciple, involves suffering--so they fear to ask the question. But while we understand that, maybe sometimes the hard questions should be asked. Maybe especially *our* hard questions, addressed to God, should be asked. Even if we don't easily understand or like whatever kind of answer we may get, there's little point in fearing to ask God the questions of our hearts. Are we afraid to look foolish before God? Surely that's a moot point. Are we afraid that God's answer may frighten us or ask something of us we don't like? Even then, pouring out our honest

questions, doubts, and fears, is a freeing and faithful way to be a disciple of Christ. And sometimes by *not* asking a question, whether in our dealings with this world, or in prayer with God, we go astray.

The disciples feared to ask their question, and what happens next? They indulge in a contentious, futile, competitive argument. They take on the antagonistic and noisy stance of the surrounding world and go for it. When they arrive at Christ's home in Capernaum He asks them what they were talking about on the way there. There's an embarrassed silence. No one wants to admit that they had all been haggling over which of them was the greatest! I mean, their Lord tells them he's going to suffer and die; they fail to respond in any way to that at all, and then they secretly argue for several miles of walking about which of them is number one. In the face of Christ's anguished prediction of suffering and death, their response is to try and establish their pecking order. Ouch! Again, not one of their best days.

Now I understand about establishing pecking orders, partly through being a Viking's fan. It was depressing how low we were ranked as the season began, and now with 2 wins behind us, our rank has risen dramatically. I like that! I realize it shouldn't matter to me, but somehow it does. We have an inborn desire to know where we, or whatever matters to us, stand in relation to others. It's one of the reasons the world is not so much gentle as it is competitive and aggressive. As James points out in our first lesson, we want we can't have, we covet what others have, and it makes us act in angry and bitter ways. As we look at our disciples in today's lesson, there is obviously a sense of rivalry among these men. Even within their service to the Lord, they each want to be the top ranked disciple. Was Peter the greatest? He was the most outspoken leader among them. Was John the greatest? He seemed to be emotionally the closest to Jesus. Maybe Matthew was the greatest—he had worked in official capacities before and must have been educated. Ironically, their argument about who was the *biggest and best* reveals quite plainly to all posterity just how *small* they actually could be. Not one of their finest hours, no. And quite clearly, they are being held up for us not as a good example, but as a poor example, that we might learn to live differently. For sure, bad examples have some value-- we can learn a lot from seeing them, and we can try and tell ourselves that when we're at our worst, at least we're providing a bad

example for others, and maybe they can learn to be better people in contrast. However, providing a good example is *so* much more constructive for everyone around us, and here is where Christ excels.

What does he do in this instance? Think of what has just happened. His closest friends have failed to be supportive as he shares news of his impending death, and then they prove they really don't get this whole living out God's Kingdom in the here and now thing by arguing angrily about each one's superiority over the other. We might imagine Jesus either letting them have it, or walking away in despair, but He does neither. Instead, he counters the competitive, noisy, destructive sphere of being they have embraced with a far different kind of sphere: He acts calmly, peacefully, gently, and yet---oh so effectively. He overcomes their mammoth ways by taking up a child and holding that child in His arms. What speaks most profoundly and with the greatest impact against anger and arrogance? An act of loving kindness and gentleness. As all great peace-activists know, you don't fight the bully by becoming an even bigger bully, you don't quell violence with greater violence. That might be a way to win a war, but it is never a way to promote peace and well-being among people, and that's our calling. Jesus then goes on to say something startling: He tells them that those who seem least in this world---and in Jesus' world, that would have been children---*they* are the ones who will be first in God's eyes. He also declares that it is in *our* welcoming, our holding and protecting, of children and those who are at risk or vulnerable, that we welcome our very Lord. We are looking to do that welcoming as we begin our education programming for the young in our congregation, but there are so many ways we can protect the vulnerable, counter aggressiveness with gentleness, and be a part of what God's Spirit is already up to. Finding those ways may require the courage to ask hard questions, it may require letting go of that drive to be ranked number one in a hard-edged world. To attempt these kinds of counter-cultural attitudes and actions is how we follow our Lord. And as you do so, remember this: *you* are the child Christ holds in His arms. Amen.