

When FDR gave his first inaugural address he spoke those memorable words that now ring true throughout the halls of history and remain powerful for us today. He said, “The only thing we have to fear is fear itself.” Fear is something we have all faced and today we find the disciples plagued by fear.

In today’s gospel passage, Jesus continues to teach discipleship to the twelve. He again gives them mind-blowing information, and **they** are bewildered and afraid! In Mark’s gospel, it is the **second** time Jesus has this conversation with his disciples. It is the second time he tells them he will soon be betrayed, murdered, and after three days rise from the dead! Jesus’ words were so explosive the disciples could not wrap their minds around what he said.

Throughout the gospel of Mark, the disciples are portrayed as a motley group of fearful knuckleheads who just don’t get it and, in today’s reading, they live up to their reputation. You see, they are still thinking Jesus will be the one who will provide the Jewish people political deliverance from Rome. The prospect of Jesus being killed simply does not compute. This Jesus whom they believe is the promised Messiah is telling them that redemption of Israel will take place through suffering! Who

could possibly imagine that? How could **anyone** believe that an all-powerful God would conquer enemies and provide deliverance through suffering and death?

The disciples are bewildered and what do they do? Well, they **do not** ask Jesus to clarify what he is saying and answer the many questions swirling about in their confused minds. No. Why do they not ask? Mark simply says it is because they were **afraid**. And, we are left to wonder, why are they afraid? Are they afraid they might **appear** as though they are confused? Do they fear they might appear uninformed, clueless, or stupid, yet again? Do they fear they might appear unfaithful, not wanting to exhibit any sense of doubt? Or, do they fear they might get answers they do not want to hear and are not ready to hear?

I have to say the disciples' failure to understand and ask questions seems rather annoying. But, how often do we act in precisely the same manner? How often are we afraid to ask a question because we **think** we should know the answer? How often are we simply afraid to show our ignorance? How often are **we** possibly afraid of the answer we will get? Are we capable of following and living the truth of Jesus' passion? As a congregation, what are our fears as a community of faith? Do we fear the decisions we make may cause us to lose members? Or, do we **fail** to

make decisions because we fear the development of conflict? As we look at another calendar year and begin our annual stewardship drive, does our anxiety create a fear that we will not make the budget?

In his weekly blog, David Lose, president of Philadelphia Seminary, suggests:

All these fears ... strip life of pleasure and joy and make it very difficult to be wise and faithful stewards of the present moment and resources with which God has entrusted us. Jesus' response to our fears and anxieties is an invitation not to faith as intellectual assent – as if believing in God somehow prohibits fear – but rather to faith as movement, faith as taking a step forward (even a little step) in spite of doubt and fear, faith as doing even the smallest thing in the hope and trust of God's promises.

Quite frankly, fear is the opposite of faith. Fear has the power to paralyze us, to distort our thinking and drive us into despair. As we think about the disciples' fear, it is interesting to note their reaction. Rather than asking questions and facing their fears, they begin to argue. And, what is so **very** interesting is that they are not even arguing about what Jesus said. They begin to fight about which one of them is the greatest!

I have to say again, the disciples are not much different from each one of us. How often have we seen this happen in the church, within our own communities and even within our own families? Some incident, event, experience or person upsets the system. Then, fear raises its ugly head. People become fearful of possibly losing out in some way. They fear there

is not enough love to go around. They fear change within the system, and all of a sudden tempers flare and an argument ensues. And, as with the disciples in today's story, the fighting has **nothing** to do with the real issue but we react by arguing about something **else** because we cannot face our fear.

When Jesus asks the disciples what they were arguing about, the silence is deafening. I think most of us can relate to such a silence. Anyway, Jesus knows what they have been fighting about. So, he again teaches about discipleship saying, "So you want first place? Then take the last place. Be servant of all." To help them understand, he placed a curious, vulnerable child in their midst. In a culture where children were of no consequence, given no value and considered socially invisible, Jesus cradles a little child in his arms and says, "Whoever embraces one of these children as I do embraces me, and far more than me – God who sent me."

Wow! What a lesson in discipleship! Not only has Jesus hit the disciples with earth shattering news, he again turns their thinking, and ours, inside out and upside down.

My friends, fear has the power to blind us to what God is doing here among us as we live together in community. Fear has the power to blind us to what God is up to in this world. Fear has the power to blind us from

recognizing God's kingdom at work as it is breaking in upon us. Fear prevents us from seeing Jesus in a different way and that is challenging because, if we see Jesus in a different way, we begin to see each other in a different way. And, you can count on the fact that when Jesus breaks into our lives with overwhelming grace he is **always** going to challenge us, challenge our assumptions, change our world and change **us** as we are called to travel more deeply into a life of discipleship.

Jesus continues to teach what real discipleship is all about by telling us that greatness in the kingdom of God means becoming a servant. Discipleship means taking the last place and **not** being on top. It is so hard to do this because we want to be in control and we are so **fearful** of letting go and letting God take control. Jesus says that discipleship Jesus' style means welcoming the **child**, welcoming those who are socially invisible, welcoming those whom the rest of society excludes, and welcoming those the world does not value, those whom we tend to **fear**. Discipleship, Jesus' style, means welcoming those who do **nothing** but are simply welcomed and embraced. In reality, the vulnerable child who **fearlessly** comes with questions is where discipleship begins. The truth of the matter is, discipleship begins as **we become** the child on Jesus' lap.