

St. Thomas Aquinas once said, “Fear is such a powerful emotion for humans that when we allow it to take over within us, it drives compassion right out of our hearts.” Change, transition, uncertainty, chaos and earth-shattering news all create within us a sense of fear. Fear has plagued our culture and the world throughout this pandemic, and we have seen how it drives compassion right out of people’s hearts. So, it is fitting that today’s gospel reading helps us look at this very human emotion.

In today’s gospel passage, Jesus continues to teach the twelve about discipleship. He again gives them earth-shattering, mind-blowing information, and **they** are bewildered and **afraid!** Today, we hear Jesus again tell the disciples he is going to be killed. It is the second time he tells them he will soon be betrayed, murdered, and after three days rise from the dead! Jesus’ words are so explosive the disciples simply cannot wrap their minds around what he says. They cannot comprehend this news and they are **afraid.**

Throughout the gospel of Mark, the disciples are portrayed as a motley group of knuckleheads who just don’t get it and, in today’s reading, they again 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. So, what do they do? Well, at first they stay silent and they **do not** ask Jesus to clarify what he is saying. They do **not** ask Jesus to 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? Do they fear they might **appear** to be confused? Do they fear they might appear uninformed, clueless, or stupid, yet again? Do they fear they might appear unfaithful? Or, do they fear they might get answers they do not want to hear and are not ready to hear?

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** already know the answer? How often are we simply afraid to show our ignorance? In a world where we work so hard, striving to succeed, how can we possibly let ourselves appear so vulnerable? And, how often are we

possibly afraid of the answer we will **get**? Are we afraid of being a follower 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 the beginning of our annual stewardship drive, does our anxiety create a fear that we will not make the budget?

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 are first silent, **then** 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!

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. Dr. Emlyn Ott, one of my seminary professors who teaches classes on congregational leadership from the perspective of systems theory, always says that when

a system, whether it is a family system, a congregational system, or any kind of system gets challenged in some way, the knee-jerk **reaction** from those within the system is **fight** or **flight**. People start to argue, or they flee and disconnect. And, we see the disciples reacting as Dr. Ott would predict. Challenged by Jesus' words, they start to fight, to argue.

Yes, the disciples are so much like us. Or, rather, we are so much like the disciples. When Jesus asks the disciples what they are arguing about, again, there is silence, and it is deafening. And, I think most of us can relate to such a silence. Anyway, Jesus **knows** what they have been fighting about. So, he again teaches them about discipleship saying, "So you want first place? So, you want to be at the top? Then, take the last place. Be **servant** of all." To help them understand, he places a curious, vulnerable child in their midst. Now, to understand what is really happening here, we must understand that children were thought of very differently in this ancient culture than they are in our culture. Nadia Boz Weber succinctly articulates the difference between the way children were regarded then as opposed to the manner in which we treat our children today. She says:

These children didn't exactly take bubble baths every night before being tucked into their Sesame Street bed sheets and read Goodnight Moon. There was no sentimentality about childhood because childhood was actually a time of terror. Children in those

days only really had value as replacement adults but until then they were more like mongrel dogs than they were beloved members of a family. And they weren't even really housebroken. They just kind of leaked everywhere and they died like, all the time. Children were dirty and useless and often unwanted and to teach his disciples about greatness and hospitality, Jesus puts **not** a chubby-faced angel, but **THIS** kind of child in the center, folds **THIS** kind of child into his arms and says when you welcome the likes of **THIS** child you welcome me.

In a culture where children were of no consequence, given no value and considered socially invisible, Jesus cradles a dirty, smelly, rejected 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 has the power to blind us from recognizing those we consider "other" as children of God. 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 and **move** 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. And, oh my, in doing so he turns our thinking and understanding of success upside down! 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, dirty child who **fearlessly** comes with questions is where discipleship begins. The truth of the matter is, discipleship begins as **we become** the vulnerable child on Jesus' lap.