

In the Name of the Living God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

But they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him.

Isn't that the truth?

Did not understand him, and afraid to ask.

Because even though they had been with him, and learned from him, and saw and heard what he did, they came at their experiences with him from their long settled, world view....which is that the world centers around me. It is all about me. I look out for number 1.

“What were you arguing about on the way?” he asked them. They had an idea that he would not like it, so they did not answer him. Tried to keep it from him.

But we know...because we know ourselves best of all, if we are at all honest about it. It was all over who was going to be the greatest of them. When he becomes king of a free and united Israel, and is seated on the throne, which one of them will be his most important advisor, and who will be the governor of this region or that?

But Jesus? He is out of control. Talking about willingly....willingly...going to his death...and then, to rise up again after three days. They probably ask themselves, “That is in the scriptures, but do you mean to tell me that he really believes in it?”

Remember, it was only a few weeks ago in our gospel that Jesus challenged them to leave, like the others were doing...and Simon Peter replied, in effect, “We have been changed. We have been transformed. To whom else can we go?” In other words, we have seen, heard and lived through changes of life that will not allow us to return to who we were, so we are staying with you.

But this....going to your death and the rest...that was not the plan.

In their way of thinking, that is the wrong way. The right way is getting ahead in life. Dreaming about something more than survival, and then doing something about it....better education, more marketable skills. Working hard for the benefits of that labor. Sounds quite ok to me...just like all of us...and with good hearts, and good intentions. But, like the disciples, we do not get it. Do not understand...and are afraid to ask. What is wrong with this picture?

It is human nature to want to do better. It is human nature to say that, even though I want or need to be better than the next guy, I do not want my life to improve at my neighbor's expense. But,

unfortunately, whether I want it or not, that is exactly what happens, and how it happens...from before recorded time. It is within the very nature of who we are that, in any number of various ways and measurements, our own self worth is calculated upon a comparison to someone else.

It is the foundation of everything in the world around us. Everything.

I cannot look at an email without seeing a sidebar advertising a method or product that shows some muscular guy with six-pack abs, saying that he is “crazy ripped”. And I cannot watch televised sports without the constant, constant hair treatment commercials featuring guys with full heads of hair, lounging pool side with a pretty girl in a bikini gazing at him, telling baldy to get into the game.

National interests and strategies are no different, only much, much bigger. At some point, perhaps maybe this week, the campaign commercials MAY start to focus on the key question of asking, “Are you better than you were last election?” But more likely, the commercials will reek of more negativity and personal attacks...they like to call it “government”.

Anyway, scripture is no different...Moses tells Pharaoh, “Our God is stronger than your God.” And much of the Old Testament seems to tell the story of ancient Israel’s domination of other peoples for occupation of “quote” their land “unquote”....which was taken from somebody else before them. And today? North Korea wants a nuclear program because they do not have one, and the United States and other nuclear countries do not want them to precisely for that reason. They say they want respect, and we say that they cannot be trusted and do not deserve that trust.

That is what these disciples were arguing about. I am better than you. Smarter than you. Prettier. Heathier. Whatever. I am closer to “the man” than you. In case you think church is immune from this, we hear it all the time...but in “church speak”, it is over topics like a subtle competition over which church has more folks in the pews, and who has the bigger financial endowment.

The disciples are all about who among them was Numero Uno, at the same time Jesus tries to tell them what was in store for him. That Jesus is unconcerned with personal survival and is focused completely on realizing his vision of the kingdom of God...even to the point of dying for it...puts these disciples, and us, to shame.

But before he goes to the cross for this vision, he speaks through a symbol, a metaphor. An image that still haunts the imagination of his disciples. Jesus steps outside into the village street and returns holding a toddler, an ordinary child from an ordinary family. He places this little one in the midst of the circle of his disciples.

Remember that in the ancient world, children were especially powerless. They simply did not count. They were the last and the least. The bottom of the pile.

"Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all." That is what Jesus says as he steps outside to fetch the child, the kid from the streets of Capernaum. It is as if he says: So you want to be a leader, you want to be first? Fine. But do it the right way. Forget about your own survival. Die to your old self. Get born again. Start over as a child. That is where the real leadership is in the kingdom of heaven...those who are transformed, and help to transform others.

Have the purity of a child. A child's simplicity. Fearlessness. Trust. Get a vision and pursue it for all you are worth, like a little child running full out for daddy or mommy. Be single-minded as you chase your vision, even as I am single-minded making my way to my Friday death and Sunday resurrection.

The toddler from Capernaum starts climbing all over Jesus, stepping here and there, reaching out for his beard, sticking fingers in his mouth. The man can barely get out his next words:

"Anybody who welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and anybody who welcomes me is really welcoming the one who sent me."

This child represents the new birth, the fresh start, necessary to real fellowship and real life. To welcome this in someone honors Christ, honors his Father who makes it all possible.

Vision. Trust. Willingness to risk.

These appear in a toddler, in Jesus, in every saint, and in the people we might see as transformational examples. People who may not understand, but also are not afraid to ask. It is the same Spirit at work in all of them.

When we catch that Spirit, or allow that Spirit to catch us, we are set free from fear. Personal survival is not our number one issue. Instead, the vision is what matters. And so the world can change. It DOES change, starting with us.

Something as simple...and yet as deeply profound....as serving others. Something like assisting our children...those who are powerless and insignificant in the eyes of the world, but everything in the eyes of God.

If, like me, you find some sense of discomfort from the center of the message for today, perhaps we can all give thanks in the name of the God who works to transform the world through those rare ones whose last word is not themselves, but a vision given to them by the grace of God we know as the Father, and as the Son, and as Holy Spirit. Amen.