Our first passage for this morning is from the letter of James. The 16th century reformer Martin Luther called the book of James an “epistle of straw” because James’ emphasis on the importance of action and “good works” interfered with Luther’s focus on salvation by faith and grace alone. The truth is what you really trust deep in your gut and how you live your life in the world are inevitably linked. Faith and works go hand in hand.

In today’s passage, James contrasts the wise and understanding with those who have bitter envy and selfish ambition. Listen for the marks of the wisdom from above, and compare them to what James calls earthly wisdom, which leads to conflicts and disputes.

Who is wise and understanding among you? Show by your good life that your works are done with gentleness born of wisdom. But if you have bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not be boastful and false to the truth. Such wisdom does not come down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, devilish. For where there is envy and selfish ambition, there will also be disorder and wickedness of every kind. But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy. And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace for those who make peace.

Those conflicts and disputes among you, where do they come from? Do they not come from your cravings that are at war within you? You want something and do not have it; so you commit murder. And you covet something and cannot obtain it; so you engage in disputes and conflicts. You do not have, because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, in order to spend what you get on your pleasures. Adulterers! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God. Or do you suppose that it is for nothing that the scripture says, ‘God yearns jealously for the spirit that he has made to dwell in us’? But he gives all the more grace; therefore it says, ‘God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble.’ Submit yourselves therefore to God.

Our passage from Mark’s gospel shows us Jesus teaching the disciples—as he did in last week’s passage—that he will suffer, be killed, and rise again. This time he adds that he will be betrayed, which ups the ante a little bit. As you listen what the disciples do right after Jesus’ prediction of his passion, think about what group James would put them in. Are they the wise and understanding? Or do they fit in the other, much less laudable, group?

They went on from there and passed through Galilee. He did not want anyone to know it; for he was teaching his disciples, saying to them, ‘The Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him, and three days after being killed, he will rise again.’ But they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him.

Then they came to Capernaum; and when he was in the house he asked them, ‘What were you arguing about on the way?’ But they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another about who was the greatest. He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, ‘Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.’ Then he took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms,
he said to them, 'Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.'

I’ve said this before, but I do love the way the Gospel of Mark depicts the twelve disciples, the ones closest to Jesus. They are just so, well, human. This makes it easy for us to recognize ourselves in them. Unlike Jesus, who is also fully human according to Christian tradition, the disciples don’t appear to be in touch with their capacity for divinity—even though they spend day in and day out walking alongside one who incarnates the divine love so fully and beautifully. They just don’t seem to be able to understand.

Take today’s Gospel lesson. Jesus has just laid out for a second time that he’s going to be killed. In response to that, the text says, “The disciples didn’t understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him.”

Why were they afraid to ask? Maybe, like a lot of other adults, they didn’t want to say, “I don’t know.” Did they think that Jesus would scold them for not getting what he’d said right off the bat? It wouldn’t be the first time he’d done so. They were in a boat together, and the disciples were worrying about lunch—someone had forgotten to bring bread and they had only one loaf between them all. And Jesus went off. Why are you talking about not having any bread? Weren’t you paying attention when I fed the multitudes, twice? Can’t you trust that God can use what you and I bring to provide enough and to spare? The disciples had gotten an earful from Jesus before.

It could be that they were afraid to ask Jesus what he meant because they didn’t want to understand. Upton Sinclair said, “It is difficult to get a man to understand something when his salary depends upon him not understanding it.” Likewise, it is hard to comprehend a message when our comfort with the status quo or our way of life depends on us not comprehending it. I’ll wager that the disciples did not want to ask Jesus what he meant because they were afraid he’d explain it so clearly and completely that they would understand that it had ramifications for how they, as his followers, lived, too. How it might lead them to live in a way that took them out of their comfort zone, out beyond fear, out into laying their lives—and their ego and pride—on the line in service to others.

You can’t follow someone who was willing to be killed for the sake of love and justice and not at least occasionally wonder if you should not be bolder in the way you stand up for what is the most just and loving thing to do. I don’t think you can do it. It just nags at you, doesn’t it? It nags at me.

I suspect the twelve already had inklings of that insight—that they’d be called to lay out their lives in service to others. But they didn’t want to hear it. Their old way of living life—James calls it bitter envy, selfish ambition, conflicts and disputes—had a strong hold on them, as is evidenced by their argument on the way to Capernaum.

‘Who among us is the greatest? Who is better than everybody else?’ When Jesus asked them what they were arguing about, they knew better than to respond.

They just jammed their hands in the pockets of their tunics, looked down, and said, well...um...yeah. Nothing. They had been called out—and they knew it.

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What a humbling experience that must have been for them.

I spent some time this week reflecting on humility—I gathered up a few quotes looking for the right one to put on the bulletin.

Richard Paul Evans wrote: *Humility is the wisdom of accepting the truth that you might just be wrong.*

Ezra Taft Benson wrote: *Pride is concerned with who is right. Humility is concerned with what is right.*

Thomas Moore called humility *that low, sweet root from which all heavenly virtues shoot.*

William Law said that it is *nothing else but a right judgment of ourselves.*

And the Shakers would say that it is *coming down where we ought to be.*

C.S. Lewis wrote: *Humility is not thinking less of ourselves, but thinking of ourselves less.*

And Jesus said, to bickering disciples who were concerned with being the greatest and pursuing selfish ambition, "Whoever wants to be first must be least of all and servant of all."

Then he gave them a living illustration of what he meant. He took a little child—a street urchin, perhaps—one that would have had been ignored and discounted as many children were in that day—and ours—and placed the child in their midst, saying, "Welcome one of these children and you are welcoming me—and not just me, but the divinity within and beyond me—the One who sent me."

Last night, at the wedding reception for Mary Ford and Adam Graeber, Judith and I spent time out on the dance floor as usual. Pretty soon, we noticed that the little two-year-old niece of the groom was out there cutting a rug, too. Swaying to the music in her little lacy dress, doing the Nene, moving in time with beat. A tiny dancer, close to the ground and alive to the moment, surrounded by these big bodies of adults who were delighted to see her dancing.

I thought, there are some things I can learn from this kid. About being close to the moment, close to the ground, close to our humanity, celebrating life and dancing to its rhythm.

But then I thought, what about all the children in the world who are not celebrated as she is? What are we called to do to be a blessing to them in humble service?

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My mind went to the photo we talked about two weeks ago of the three-year-old boy whose lifeless body has focused the world’s attention on the plight of Syrian migrants. And I thought of what I’ve heard about the former Prime Minister of Hungary, who has been welcoming migrants into his home and feeding them and giving them a place to sleep on their way. Now the law in Hungary is that if you are caught assisting migrants, you will be liable to up to 3 years of imprisonment. Do you know what the former prime minister said to that? “I’m going to keep doing it anyway.”

Sallie Casto sent me something the other day. She had a preview of an article that was coming out in today’s Washington Post. It’s an article about the Jesuit Volunteer Corps.

There are six young adult volunteers here in D.C. this year working with the JVC. They are between 21 and 23. Camille, Angela, Noah, Hanna, John, and Liz. I should add that we have a similar sort of group here through our Presbyterian denomination, so it’s not just the Jesuits who get this right.

The article says:

_A simple lifestyle is one of the four pillars of the Jesuit Volunteer Corps, which began in 1956. The other pillars are spirituality, community living and social justice. Over the past month, in 37 U.S. cities and six other countries, nearly 300 recent college graduates have jumped off career paths and sprinted to the margins of society. They have banded together to live out these four pillars for a year, to embody the ideals of the world’s most famous Jesuit, whose church exists not in the pews of a cathedral but in the midst of people in need._

You know who that most famous Jesuit is. He’s coming here to Washington on Tuesday. His arrival is going to mess up our presbytery meeting, by the way!

Pope Francis wrote this in 2013: “All of us are asked to obey [God’s] call to go forth from our own comfort zone, in order to reach all the ‘peripheries’ in need of the light of the Gospel.”

_The comfort zones for Angela, Camille, Hannah, John, Liz, and Noah were their college campuses. The peripheries are here in the nation’s capital, in their tight living quarters on Keefer Place NW, on the 70 bus down Georgia Avenue before the sun rises. Hanna, a dance student, will be working as mental health specialist at the McClendon Center, serving adults with schizophrenia and bipolar disorder and other mental illnesses._

The article says:

_‘She feels wildly underqualified, but that’s the point. Otherwise, she’d be in her comfort zone.’_

“All of us are asked to obey [God’s] call to go forth from our own comfort zone, in order to reach all the ‘peripheries’ in need of the light of the Gospel.”

I think that’s a call to humility, to humble service and caring for the least of these.

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Whether from a Pope or a Presbyterian, that’s a message we need to speak and a message we need to hear and a message we need to heed.

In Jesus’ name. Amen.