



“First Things First”

James 3:13-18; Mark 9:33-37; 10:13-16

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Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost

As New Yorkers are well aware, the leaders of the world gathered in our city this week for the opening of the United Nations General Assembly. The whomp-whomp of helicopters, snarled traffic and banner headlines signaled the familiar annual get-together.

That sometimes-odd collection of high achievers made speeches, negotiated in public and private, and added more headlines as some made sense and others made spectacles of themselves. Some world leaders demonstrated grace, wit, and wisdom; others displayed outsized egos and overcharged rhetoric with a bit of preening and strutting across the world stage.

But then, as one U.N. official put it, “No one pays attention to the speeches anyway....”

Each of those world leaders, I suppose, has achieved a form of greatness — at least in their own culture. And, like it or not, for better and for worse, each has earned a place on the world stage.

It is also true that many of them and/or their national agendas have contributed to the tragic disorder of our world. Some leaders’ personal or national agendas, along with their poisonous words and reckless actions, create bitter divisions, destructive forces, poverty, violence and war. As our epistle text puts it, there are “all kinds of devilish evils” out there, and too many world leaders like it that way.

What if we put all those world leaders on a bus today and brought them over to Plymouth Church and seated them in the balcony? And what if I stood and said to them, “I know it will be difficult for you, but please sit and listen for a moment. In the name of God and all that is good and holy, everything you ever thought about greatness, your personal or national success, the exercise of power, how to achieve peace and prosperity for your nation and the world, all of it is DEAD WRONG?”

“You need to change your entire frame of reference or we are doomed to the same disorder, divisions, destruction, power grabs, poverty and war. Self-interest and national interests for too long have robbed the world of peace, prosperity, and justice.

“A radical rethinking is in order. It seems the same old ways of doing world business aren’t working well. It seems obvious the old conventional wisdoms that support statecraft and international relations don’t work, or at least don’t work well.

“You think personal or national greatness is achieved by promoting your own ethnic or national interests. You think whoever has the most power – or the power to disrupt those with the most power – is national greatness. You believe that national (or

personal) wealth is a sign of greatness. You think the ability to alter the fate of other nations is to succeed.

“Well, you are DEAD WRONG!”

“I want to show you an alternative kind of greatness by which to measure yourself and your nation. This wisdom has the capacity to change the world. Will all the children of the church come to the front for the children’s sermon?”

“See these children, sitting quietly and peacefully on the floor? Some came to the front holding hands with a friend. Many are sitting close to a friend. Others are in a parent’s lap. See their gentle spirits and how naturally they show mercy? Not one of them is the least bit impressed by the portfolio or status of the other’s parents. None of them relies on income or influence to get their way. They honor, respect, accept and love each other simply because they are and are here. They naturally yield to each other, and there isn’t a hint of dishonesty or hypocrisy among them. None of them can make it on their own, and they know it. They live in peace because they don’t yet know better.

“Not one of them has achieved a thing in life except being born. They love each other and we treasure them simply because they belong to us. And for what it’s worth, they aren’t the least bit impressed by any of you!! They don’t care about your office, your power, or your armed forces. In fact they think much more of their moms and dads than of you – if they’ve ever thought about you at all.

“Each of them is a treasured member of this community and, quite frankly, they need protection from some of you. You can learn something powerful and transforming from them – if you will pay attention.”

I suspect you just experienced a bit of the shock Jesus’ disciples felt in our Gospel Lessons from Mark. They’d been on the road with Jesus planting the kingdom of God in the lives of men, women and children. It was a successful venture if measured by the number of people who showed up to see Jesus and the number of those whose lives were changed by faith in him.

The disciples were feeling good about their prospects as emerging world leaders. After all, if he succeeded in establishing God’s kingdom, then they, the inner circle, would be leaders of the world. I suppose it’s a heady and ego-boosting experience to know you are an emerging world leader!

On the road home they began to argue about which of them belonged in what cabinet posts in the coming kingdom of God on earth. Who deserved what slot? Whose resume was the best for that position? Who would be closest to the throne? It was typical: a group of men jockeying for power and prestige. Sort of like the U.N. or Congress!

Jesus overheard the conversation. When they got home, he decided to teach them a critical lesson about greatness in the kingdom of God.

“I heard you arguing about who would be the greatest,” he said. “I want to tell you this. You are DEAD WRONG! “

“In God’s new order, the old way of measuring success and greatness means nothing. In God’s new world, greatness is measured by willingness to become the servant of everyone. You do not gain rank or position by measuring achievements – yours or anyone else’s.”

To demonstrate his point, he took a child and stood the child in the middle of his disciples. That in itself was a shock. In Jesus’ world – and the world of those male disciples – children were non-beings. Until adulthood, they belonged at home with their

mothers who were also non-beings in that world. Fathers exercised the power of life and death over their children.

In fact, in the second Gospel Lesson, Mark 10:13-16, the disciples tried to send the children and their parents home - where they belonged. They didn't belong in circles of power or in the deliberations of a famous rabbi and his students.

"Look at this child," Jesus told them. "You are measuring greatness by the wrong standard. This child has no regard for your resume, your status in life, or your level of success. And neither should you measure anyone by that old, false, and destructive standard.

"The way of children is supposed to be the way of the world. Observe them carefully and note the alternative wisdom they bring to the world – and the community – if you pay attention. Notice the absence of bitter envy and selfish ambition. Note also the gentle spirit of children, their capacity to live in peace, their lack of rank and partiality – and note their natural mercy to each other.

"Treasure the children among you. They are wiser than they know – and wiser than you might think."

Then, after sternly rebuking the disciples for trying to send the children home, Jesus took a child, put the child on his lap, wrapped his arms around her and some other children and blessed them.

"How you treat a child is how you treat me – and how you receive and treat God," he added," but treasure them because I am in them, and know this: I care for them very much."

We should treasure the children among us not just because they are precious lives, but we treasure them because in many ways they are wiser than we.

James 3 puts it another way. If we live by the ordinary wisdom of the world – the kind used by most leaders of the world, the consequences will be disorder, bitter envy, selfish ambition, fights and wars. But if we live out of the wisdom that comes from God, the consequences will be peace, gentle spirits, capacity to yield to each other, abundant mercy, and lack of partiality. There is, James suggests, "a righteousness that is sown in peace by those who make peace."

Now I don't expect the United Nations – or the United States – to heed Jesus' and James' alternative wisdom. I don't think Jesus did either. The ways of the world are far too alluring and addictive.

But I do know this – and this is the good news I bring you today. God has been creating an alternative community that is learning to live out of that alternative wisdom and to experience its transforming power.

God calls us to be a contrarian people who challenge all conventional wisdoms by living out of God's radical alternative wisdom. And our children are our guides. How radical is that!

We know greatness as the world measures it. Some of us have achieved it – at least people say we have. But we know an alternative wisdom too. And we know where to find it. It's right before our eyes.

If we pay attention, the models of that wisdom sit on our laps, sit in our pews and classrooms, and live in our homes. If we pay attention, we are the wiser for it – and our lives will be far more peaceable.

There is, after all, a righteousness sown in peace for those who make peace.

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Amen

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