

**PENTECOST:
A TIME TO EXPERIENCE GOD'S HOLY SPIRIT ALIVE AND ACTIVE**

Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Proper 20

September 20, 2009

Jeremiah 11:18-20 or Wisdom of Solomon 1:16—2:1, 12-22

Psalm 54

James 3:13—4:3, 7-8a

Mark 9:30-37

Winners and Losers

We live in a culture obsessed with fame and status. Most of us have a highly developed sense of what makes one person a winner and another a loser. We can spend inordinate amounts of time and attention on improving our self image according to a complicated set of social “rules.” However, it makes for a frenetic, confusing, and stressful existence. We even watch TV shows where the biggest loser (i.e., most “successful” crash dieter) turns out to be the “winner.” Worrying about where we stand in relation to others is a dangerous obsession. Alain de Botton in his book *Status Anxiety* (2004) writes, “If our position on the ladder is a matter of such concern, it is because our self-conception is so dependent upon what others make of us. Rare individuals aside (Socrates, Jesus), we rely on signs of respect from the world to feel tolerable to ourselves” (viii). Such comparative self-analysis can make people forget what truly matters.

And so it is with Jesus’ disciples in today’s Gospel reading. First, Jesus succinctly explains to them for a second time what God’s victory looks like (see Mark 8:31 for his first attempt to get this message across). The success upon which all human salvation shall depend, he reminds them, is predicated upon Jesus’ suffering and death. This is not what “winning” looked like to most people in the Roman world. The Bible says, “The disciples did not understand what Jesus meant, and they were afraid to ask” (Mark 9:32, *CEV*).

Confusion and fear—two key components of anxiety. It is on the heels of this anxiety-provoking conversation that the disciples begin quarreling about which one of them is “the greatest.” Perhaps they argued about which one Jesus favored the most, or which among them would work the most eye-popping, jaw-dropping miracles in the weeks and months ahead. Or, who would be in charge if Jesus were to die as he had just told them he would. Perhaps privately, each disciple had a vision of what rewards would come with being “the greatest.”

Jesus cuts short their argument with a lesson and illustration. First he tells them that the Roman (secular) world they live in has it all wrong. “If you want the place of honor,” he tells them, “you must become a slave and serve others!” (9:35, *CEV*). It is estimated that in the Roman Empire one third of the population were slaves, people with no power or legal rights. Jesus makes it clear that the ones who will ultimately be honored the most are not those who have the most slaves (employees, fans, Facebook friends, etc.) to command and wow, but rather those persons who may inconspicuously blend in with the majority, who win little praise or recognition from the world, but who still manage to joyfully look after the needs of others with love and humility.

To illustrate this point, he embraces a child from the household and tells them, “When you welcome even a child because of me, you welcome me. And when you welcome me, you welcome the one who sent me” (9:37, *CEV*). Jesus does not present the child as an example of innocence (as we moderns might) or as an example of whole-hearted trust (as Jesus will later do in Mark 10:14-16). On this occasion, he presents this girl or boy—who in addition to being young may have been the child of a slave and so destined for a life of servitude—as an example of society’s most powerless and vulnerable people. Even in the Roman world, to disrespect a slave was to insult that slave’s master. And reverently honoring the “least important” in the knowledge that all people are created in God’s holy image, is a sure way to honor our mutual Creator. And the surest way to overcome our status anxiety is to step back from the compulsion to compare ourselves with others and to see God’s imprint in everyone we encounter. As James rightly says in another of today’s readings, “show [your wisdom] by living right and by being humble and wise in everything you do” (3:13, *CEV*).

This week’s Reflection was prepared by Charles Houser, who serves on the staff of the American Bible Society as Editorial and Publications Manager in the Nida Institute for Biblical Scholarship.

This week we remember to pray for the work of the Bible Societies in: Honduras – With thanks to God for the Bible Center, now a meeting place for the World Bank, the UN, and different denominations, and with thanks to God for protection from violence and for Bishop Emiliani who distributes Scriptures among gangs, and with prayers for the ability to provide hope with God’s Word amidst poverty and violence in the country;
Guatemala – With thanks to God for increased Scripture distribution, for *Faith Comes By Hearing* in 22 languages, which has enabled the reaching of 6,000 Protestant churches and the parishes of two Catholic dioceses with God’s Word, and for the special material for reaching violent gangs, and with prayers for the publication of the Ostuncalco Mam and Pokomchi Bible translations which will bring to nine the number of Bibles that have been translated into native tongues.

Activity Corner: “Wisdom Tree”

Supplies needed: poster board or large sheet of newsprint; 8-1/2” x 11” construction paper (assorted colors); patterns (approximately 3” x 5”) in the shape of fruit (apple, peach, pear, plum, banana, orange, lemon, grapefruit, etc.); markers; scissors; glue or paste.

Read James 3:13-18. Across the top of the poster board or newsprint, copy James 3:17 and discuss how embodying these attributes is in keeping with “wisdom from above.” Compare James 3:17 with Galatians 5:22. Across the bottom, copy James 3:18 and discuss the relationship between peace and justice. Draw a tree trunk with branches that encompasses the remaining space on the poster board or newsprint. Invite members of your household to cut out various fruit to hang on the “wisdom” tree. Each fruit should bear one of the attributes listed in James 3:17. Encourage members of your household to discuss what they can do to demonstrate these attributes in their lives. Conclude with a prayer that incorporates the thoughts shared during the discussion.