**17 Pentecost, Sept. 20, 2015, Proverbs 31, Ps 1, James 3:13;4:7; Mark 9:30-37; Rev. Mary S. Trainor**

Here is the context of today's Gospel: Jesus has just predicted His death for the apostles, He has just been Transfigured-shown as the Messiah, and He has just miraculously healed a boy. Things are intense in His ministry. Now, He and the disciples are walking along and Jesus hears them talking. Are they praying and sharing about the awesomeness of what they have witnessed? No, they are infighting: exhibiting the very human behaviors of envy and selfish ambition. Jesus knows this, and wants them to face what they have been doing, so He asks them this question, "***What were you arguing about?"*** How do the disciples react to this question? Do they openly fess up? Nope! We are told "***they were silent, for*** ***on the way they had argued with one another*** ***who was the greatest."*** They knew they had done wrong, and were being called on it -- they were speechless before Jesus. They knew their behavior was not consistent with all the teaching of Jesus that they had experienced, and they were ashamed.

What did Jesus do? He sat down with them and gently gave them a moral teaching, saying "***Whoever wants to be first must be last and servant of all.***" He illustrated this lesson with a child. He says, "***Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me***." Jesus is saying that true greatness in the eyes of God is found in seeking to serve, to reach out in love to the least and the lost. Back in that culture children were considered the least in social status, so a child was a stark contrast to the "***greatest***" that the disciples were seeking. Jesus reverses the expectations we have here on earth. Our culture teaches us, and the culture back then did too, to seek worldly power, and to fight with others to get it. We have plenty of examples, but one that is most timely and well publicized is the debate. This past Tuesday night, I watched for a full three hours the 11 candidates for president debate with each other. It sure was interesting! They stood side by side answering questions and interacting with each other on the issues. But that was not all they did: several of them exhibited the same behavior the disciples showed in today's Gospel: "***they had argued with one another*** ***who was the greatest."***

But you don't have to be an apostle or a politician to exhibit these self-focused behaviors, we humans show this in our families, communities, churches.

* I have three sisters, so argument was a part of my upbringing. At any one time, at least one of my sisters seemed to have things better off than I did -- or -- one of them thought that I had things better. Our frequent disputes were about fairness or envy. Nowadays, we laugh about how we argued back then, but back then those arguments were real.
* And, how about churches? Oh my yes, lots of examples. Here is one I read about this week(Christian Century, Sept. 16, 2015 issue). Author Amy Frykolm wrote this about the first Episcopal Church she belonged to in Colorado "**Years before I arrived at St George, a great fight had broken out about the roof of the church. Some wanted to put on a metal roof - something very common in this mountain community, where the heavy snow and bright sunshine create ice dams that can be a couple of feet high and put great pressure on shingled roofs. Others thought that a metal roof would compromise the historic character of the building. The fight became bitter, and everyone lost. No new roof was put on the building, and nearly everyone involved in the argument left the church. The roof eventually began to leak. Water damage appeared on the sanctuary ceilings and walls."** She found herself as warden, faced with dealing with this major building problem that happened because of an argument.

This week, a colleague of mine, Fr. John Ambelang who serves in Sheboygan Falls, said this bit of wisdom on this subject, "**We live in a society far too quick to argue than to agree."**

Last week, the theme of the Scripture readings was on wisdom. That theme continues today, with particular emphasis on how we get along with one another -- especially when we disagree. When we are focused on ourselves and our own selfish-ambition, when we are prideful, our behavior ends up argumentative; infighting results. The Epistle from the book of James gives us a direct moral lesson. We are to show heavenly wisdom in our behavior, in our way of life. James said, " ***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...But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits***.... ***a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace for those who make peace."*** Peace making is part of our role as Christians; the word "peace" is found 429 times in the Bible! In the book of Romans we read, We should “***make every effort to do what leads to peace***” ([14:19](http://biblia.com/bible/esv/Rom%2014.19)) and we are to do our best to be at peace even with people who resist peace ([12:18](http://biblia.com/bible/esv/Rom%2012.18)).  Making peace is possible if we do what James said in the closing of this profound passage: "***Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you."*** In other words, God is there all the time for us to draw strength and patience from in order to make peace in our interactions with others......so we are to stop and pray before we say or do anything. Through pausing and listening with God right there, we can show mutual respect and seek common ground - even in the most difficult of situations.

The Christian life is not for weaklings or whimps who do not engage in issues. The Christian life does not mean that we are apathetic or do not defend ourselves or others when injustice is done -- no -- but the Christian life does mean that we are to seek peace, drawing from God's strength. ***Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you."*** We say, in our Baptismal Covenant (BCP, p. 305) that we will, with God's help, "**seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself....and strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being**."

My prayer for you this week is that in whatever challenges you face in your life now and in the months to come, you remember James' words and make peace. "***Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you." (3:8).***

Amen.