

Grace and peace are yours from God our Father and our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ; Amen.

Our gospel text today is the reality that human life together will present struggles, conflict, and disputes that challenge our faith and may even cause us to question the health of our relationship with our Lord. The epistle of James, whom we hear very little from in the cycle of the lectionary, also echoes the conflicts that reveal the human nature of our being, but calls us again to live on the divine side of life.

As Jesus speaks to His disciples in the gospel text, He is teaching them alone and not in the surroundings of the crowds that are constantly following them about. Clearly Jesus is aware of the conversation His disciples are having about the same issue James speaks of in His letter, in that they are quarreling among themselves. When Jesus questions them about their discussion, the disciples do not give Jesus a reply and still He knows they are trying to determine who among them is the greatest.

Last week James revealed in his epistle that the small rudder guides the mighty ship and the tongue as the smallest member stains the whole body with its words. Of all the beasts in nature, all can be tamed, but the human tongue cannot be tamed. The disciples ask what might seem a simple harmless question; “who among us is the greatest?” But the implications of this question are for more to consider as Jesus explains.

Where does greatness come from? What makes greatness? Will greatness last? Is greatness a human characteristic or a divine attribute? For the disciples to begin down this road is to only arrive at the conclusion that any ‘greatest’ people see within each other is to see the very gifts of God alone that are provided for the sake of caring and tending to the lives and communities of those in our care.

And still we have this urge, this desire, and this temptation to live on the human side of life and see, compare, and experience greatness for our self. We see great leaders, people that we might aspire to or even model our life after. We might even compare ourselves (and our accomplishments) to those of other people for the sake of measuring our ‘perceived greatness’. And finally, at the end of the day, we might sit back and enjoy the greatness we have become in the eyes of ourselves in the context of those around us.

The epistle James writes speaks of this very nature and calls upon us to look deeper and closer into the life that unites and equalizes us with one another; rather than that which divides us and compares us. James calls us to seek and draw near to God and God will draw near to us.

Jesus is correcting His disciples when he hears them speaking about the human side of life and gently brings them back into the fold of the divine side of life. He shares the truth of the Kingdom that life is about service; it is about what we can do for others and not about what we ourselves can achieve. Life in the kingdom is about caring for the children of God, who are infants in their faith, and nurturing them with Word and Sacrament until they reach the maturity to begin rearing those of tender and new faith.

My friends, this is not human work we perform, but the divine work of God's Kingdom that we participate in with a willing heart, a faithful understanding, and the gifts for the trade. The greatness that is observed, witness, or recorded is not that of human strength or endurance, but that of Almighty God working through His people to tend and care for all His flocks within creation. It is God alone who is great and He shares the gifts of His kingdom with you and me to accomplish the work He has placed before us to His glory alone.

James writes about the wisdom that comes with mature faith and calls us to listen to our heart and understanding to live on the divine side of life. James' epistle is targeted to the twelve tribes of Israel that have now been scattered like leaves in the wind. James writes and call them to listen, observe, and come together as one; he calls them to draw near to their God and God will draw near to them.

James is a very special author and apostle in our history, but he is not one of Jesus' disciples. James is a very good and faithful Jew who was a skeptic that Jesus was anything special until after His death and resurrection, which only then did he become a devoted follower of Christ. You see it is this apostle James who is the very brother of Jesus, once found himself speaking of greatness (or lack thereof) in the context of his brother and Lord. Now James' faith has come to maturity and he is telling the world to stop living in the worldly kingdom, as he once did, and experience life in the Kingdom that God has established in our presence.

There is nothing to be gained in conversations about human greatness, while only praise and thanksgiving is extended to our God when our greatness is recognized as the empowerment and gifts from a generous and caring Lord who provides and sustains all that is His.

Welcome one another as we are and see the greatness of God and His Spirit within each other. Welcome the stranger and look for the greatness of God in a new relationship. Welcome one another as children of our Heavenly Father in the name of our Lord, and you will welcome the Lord Himself. And when you welcome your Lord, you welcome the one who sent Him; you welcome your God.

Welcome one another; welcome everyone in the name of the Lord and draw near to God. God will draw near to you as His beloved children to whom He is pleased to give the peace that passes all understanding to keep our hearts and minds through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.