

Proper 20B + 18th Sun after Pentecost + Sept 23, 2018

Jeremiah 11:18-20 • Psalm 54 • James 3:13-4:3, 7-8a • Mark 9:30-37

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Studies say that 4 minutes of uninterrupted eye contact increases intimacy.

In fact, more than 20 years ago, psychologist Arthur Aron actually succeeded in making two strangers fall in love in his laboratory. All it takes is 4 minutes.

My favorite social experimenters, the people at Soul Pancake, tried this experiment out a couple years ago.¹ They had 6 couples give this a try:

- + 2 complete strangers.
- + A couple on their 4th date.
- + A couple that had been together for 1 year.
- + Another that had been together for 5 years.
- + A couple that had been married for 2 years.
- + And finally, an adorable couple that had been married for 55 years.

Young and old, they all seemed nervous, a little anxious, about this experiment: looking into each other's eyes for 4 minutes. Even on camera, they whispered to one another, "***I'm nervous, are you nervous? I don't know what we are doing.***" Another, "***It seems like infinity...***" Another, "***I can blink right?***" "***Ssshhh, we aren't supposed to talk...***" A roughly middle-aged man rubbed his eyes in preparation, "***This is intense.***"

The older gentleman commented to his wife that he should have gone to bathroom, and she thought looking into each other's eyes seemed unnatural. As they began, she says to him, "***I'm going to hypnotize you.***"

It was fascinating to have a spectator's window into this peculiar experiment. Some sat still. Other's shifted. Many smiled...sometimes awkwardly, embarrassed even. Giggles would slip out. Some couples shifted to touch one another, even with their feet.

It was a window into a powerfully intimate moment.

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The disciples were having a moment themselves. But not a good one.

They've been called out, and I imagine they are speechless. For the second time, Jesus tells them that he will be betrayed, killed, and raised on the third day. And for the second time, they don't understand. They don't get it. A subtitle for the Gospel of Mark could be: The Clueless Disciples.

But their confusion here today is not simply about what Jesus is teaching. They misunderstand more than Jesus is trying to tell them. The disciples still do not understand who Jesus is and what it means for him to be the Messiah. It was widely believed that the Messiah would be a warrior, a military leader who would overthrow the Roman Empire. Restore Jerusalem and the people of God to prominence and stature.

To be a disciple of that Messiah meant something.

They think they are jockeying for greatness...prestige, power, authority. We don't know exactly what they were arguing about (who witnessed the greatest miracle or who was closest to Jesus), but it doesn't matter. Jesus catches them and calls them out. They are embarrassed.

And Jesus? He is **NOT** impressed. At all. And his rebuke? **“Whoever wants to be first - that is, greatest - must be last of all and servant of all.”**

This completely flips the idea of greatness upside down. Then and now, greatness implies power, accomplishment, fame, wealth, influence, authority, and prestige. Greatness, we assume, is the sum of all the things that allow us to do things, to influence others, to make things go a particular way, our way.

This is not the greatness of Jesus. This is not the greatness of the kingdom of God.

Instead, the highest prestige in the kingdom of God would be found in service. To be a *diakonos* (the Greek for *servant*) was to be a particular type of servant, one who served meals. This was the lowest ranking of all servants, the servant of all; the one who would only be allowed to eat after everyone else had eaten their fill. This would have stung. It would have been a little shocking when you were just jockeying for a seat at the head of the table. And to drive the point home even further, before the disciples even have a chance to catch their breath or ask a question, Jesus picks up a little child: whoever welcomes a child like this welcomes Jesus in the same way.

Jesus takes it even further so that the logical end is this: Whoever welcomes a child like this welcomes God in the same way. In welcoming a child, we welcome God.

While it seems an odd shift, grammatically, in the Greek here, the word for child, *paidion*, is closely related to another word for servant (*pais*). Jesus was intentionally making a connection. In the first-century world, children were of no account. They had no rights or influence. There was no benefit to affording a child with the rituals of honor. So Jesus was using these two examples that were both seen as without honor or social standing.

This was not a sentimental scene like we see in our stained glass. This was a shocking depiction of the paradoxical values of God's will and reign. This was a proclamation by Jesus that challenged the dominant values of human institutions and societies. This proclamation leveled the peaks and valleys, assigning significance and worth to every single person, particularly the lowly.

Jesus was telling the disciples that the greatness of God is different. Jesus was telling the disciples that the greatness of God, the power of God, is found in humility and service. The greatness of God is in loving care and a self-giving posture.

What if Jesus is right? Really, what if what Jesus says is true? What if we truly believed Jesus? What if greatness is not about power and wealth and fame? What if we measured greatness by how much we share with others? What if we measured greatness by how much we give away? What if we measured greatness by how much we take care of others, particularly the most vulnerable? What if we measured greatness by how much we serve others?

This vision of the kingdom of God seems foolish because it is so radically different and counter-cultural. And yet, Jesus calls us to imagine a world in which service on behalf of the most vulnerable is seen as the epitome of greatness.

Whether 1st century or 21st century, this is a difficult shift, hard stuff. In their misunderstanding, the disciples fell into the trap of putting themselves ahead of everyone else, and we fall prey to the very same trap ourselves: trusting less in God and more in the promised security of wealth, looking out for ourselves before others, shutting others out rather than inviting them in. Too often we guard our own welfare rather than seeking to care for the welfare of others. Self-preservation and fear of the other creates chasms between one another.

We see this in the politics of today that polarize, draw lines in the sand, and paint the other side as the enemy. This is at the heart of racial inequalities and the behaviors and systems that uphold and perpetrate those inequalities. This is the genesis of gender inequalities and behaviors that have facilitated the need for the #metoo movement. Socioeconomic imbalances. Health care inadequacies. Differences in educational opportunities. Our fear of refugees. Our distrust of different cultures and religions. How we keep the poor and marginalized at an arm's length.

When we put ourselves first, before others, we go down a dangerous path that leads to systems that marginalize and dehumanize or, more simply, relationships that are unbalanced and broken.

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But here's the thing. When the disciples get caught arguing about who is greatest, they are traveling with Jesus on the road towards Jerusalem. Even while the disciples misunderstand, ignore, or fail to believe, Jesus is walking on the path towards the cross and the ultimate posture of sacrificial love. For them. For me. For you. For each and every person.

And Jesus calls us to a life of the same sacrificial love. As disciples, we walk along the same path.

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Blessed Charles de Foucauld said that, "It is by loving people that we learn to love God."

As followers of Jesus, we experience this mysterious substitution of Christ for the person we encounter, and we have the unique opportunity to acknowledge and honor the divine image in that person. In order to do that, we have to **SEE** the other person.

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At the end of the 4 minutes, the husband of the couple married for 55 years asks his wife, "How did you feel?" "Weird," She says. "In 55 years of marriage we've never really looked into each other's eyes like that. But I do look at your eyes sometimes because I'm checking your blood sugar." "You check on me all the time." He says, and then continues: "When I look at you really closely, I realize how much I need you. And how much you mean to me."

The two strangers: "It's pretty interesting to be able to sit in front of someone you don't know...you feel like you *can't not* see each other."

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If in welcoming another person we welcome God in the same way, then we must look closely and realize how much we need that person.

If welcoming another person is welcoming God, then we *can't not* see the other person.

Both the person we like and also the person we detest.
Both the person we trust and also the person we marginalize.
Both our neighbor and friend as well as the stranger and most vulnerable.

To see God in the other.
To welcome God in the other.
To serve God in the other.
This is the measure of greatness.

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The people at Soul Pancake gave their experiment the title:
How to connect with anyone.

How to connect with anyone? Look them directly in the eyes and see their divine spark.

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My prayer for you and for me is found in the words of Madeleine L'Engle, her poem *Epiphany*:

Unclench your fists
Hold out your hands.
Take mine.
Let us hold each other.
Thus is his Glory
Manifest.

¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Xm-T3HCa618>