

## Twenty-fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time, Cycle B

Wisdom 2:12, 17-20; James 3:16-4:3; and Mark 9:30-37

Gentleness is not my strong suit, but I admire those who have it, including my husband. Gentleness enables John to go into heated situations and lead the group to a resolution. He has used it when our teen-aged daughter and I were at loggerheads, when our school community was angry over a tuition hike and when his company needed major change. He reminds everyone where the common ground is and builds from there. John also accepts others, whereas I am always pushing for improvements. His gentle acceptance creates a safe place where I do not have to beat myself up and can see myself as loveable. That has empowered me to do all kinds of good in the world.

However, gentleness is not valued in our society; it is considered impractical. We have to fight back. We have to beat the competition. We have to be brutal to win the debate. We have to buy weapons so we can handle any confrontation. We have to strip minerals out of the earth, because we need them. We reserve gentleness for taking care of small children; it has no place in the real world.

Yet, all three of the readings this week uphold gentleness as holy. Jas 3 states, "The wisdom from above is first of all pure (or holy), then peaceable, gentle, compliant." Jesus says that a child is first in God's eyes. The book of Wisdom describes the just as patient and gentle. All three passages let us stand outside "the real world" and realize we actually have a choice. On the one hand, we can choose ambition, violence and social rivalry. Scripture does not deny that many have made that choice and it impacts everyone. In Wisdom, they revile and torture the gentle. Jesus relates again that others will inevitably revile and torture him to death. This is indeed the real world. On the other hand, we can choose to be gentle. Do not mistake gentleness for silence or acquiescence. As James also explains, the wisdom from above is "full of mercy and good fruits, without inconstancy or insincerity." When humans live God's wisdom, they are productive and creative.

Restlessness, what James calls our passions, drives the violent to exhaustion: "You covet but you do not possess. You kill and envy but you cannot obtain; you fight and wage war. You do not possess because you do not ask. You ask but do not receive, because you ask wrongly to spend it on your passions." Our internal cravings play out in constant social turmoil and hurt. This restlessness comes from a life without God. The book of Wisdom divides humans into those who choose a relationship with God and those who do not. Although those who do not are powerful here in ch. 2, by ch. 5 they are defeated by God and realize that the way of the just leads to eternal life, which, for the author of Wisdom, is a relationship with God<sup>1</sup>. Violence succeeds in the short term, while gentleness succeeds in the long term.

Jesus asks the disciples, "What were you arguing about on the way?" Since for Mark "the way" means the path toward God, Jesus sits down. The disciples have stopped moving toward God. Gentle Jesus does not leave them behind; instead, he stops too and invites them to see another perspective. Jesus places a child "in their midst." Jesus' society considered children unimportant and stupid. In contrast Jesus places "the least" at the center of our attention. God's attention is on those who are powerless. We see this as Jesus puts his arms around the child and says, "whoever receives one child... receives me" and receives God. When Jesus declares the great are servants, he does not use *doûlos*, a slave, who is forced into servitude, but rather *diákonos*, one who makes a free choice out of love. Such a choice cannot come from hearts ruled by restlessness. We have to opt for gentleness in all avenues of life, even in the so-called real world. When global or local war seems our only realistic option, we must place the people who have the least value in our society in the middle of our attention and ask, "What do they need in this situation?" God promises that such gentleness will bring peace to our world and to our lives. Aren't you ready for it? I know I am.

- ❖ Where do you see internal cravings leading to social turmoil and hurt?
- ❖ In situations of violence or striving, what happens when you ask, "What do the powerless need?"

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<sup>1</sup> Richard J. Clifford. "Wisdom." *The Paulist Biblical Commentary*. 2018. Paulist Press, pp. 562-563.