

## Dependence

Pentecost 18 - St. Andrew's Kelowna

Proverbs 31:10-31; Psalm 1; James 3:13-4:3, 7-8A; Mark 9:30-37

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Some years ago, I had the privilege of going to a Faith and Order Plenary Meeting of the World Council of Churches in Crete, Greece. There were probably about 100 delegates and there was never a shortage of beautiful Greek food each evening. One evening, I was standing in line at a buffet with a man who told me that where he came from, you would only fill your plate if you were feeding your household. The whole household ate from one plate, each in turn, and so what you put on your plate and how you ate was done so that those you called family could all eat well and live well too. It was one of those moments that completely changed how I thought about what it means to eat and how we eat and it has stayed with me for years. Have you ever had a moment like that? An encounter that opened your eyes to a totally new way of doing something you'd never really thought twice about?

This morning we journey along side the disciples as they experience one of these moments. Our gospel begins with the words "they went on from there". Jesus and his disciples were making their way along the road after a spectacular failure on the disciples' part. The disciples had tried to heal a little boy with severe seizures and they had failed. When Jesus arrived, he spoke with the boy's father about belief, and the father cried out those moving words: 'I believe; help my unbelief!' and the boy was healed (Mark 9: 24-29). And so they go on from there but they don't really leave it behind. Jesus tries to teach the disciples again about the strange wisdom of God: the Messiah will be betrayed into human hands and be killed and then in three days rise again. But the disciples don't understand and they don't ask, they don't cry out: help our unbelief! And this mixture of fear, not understanding, hurt pride and bruised egos takes them on another journey that we have all been on at one time or another: looking for confidence, worth and certainty anywhere but the place we should look. The disciples begin to argue about who among them is the greatest.

And as we sit in this awkward and very human place with them this morning I'd like to add in some wisdom from the writers of the early church summarized by the scholar and bishop Rowan Williams. I'm going to quote liberally from his summary in this sermon and I've provided the source in the footnotes of the print copy of the sermon if you'd like it <sup>1</sup>.

At the root of pride (and envy), our early Christian tradition teaches us, is our failure to accept our dependence, to accept our createdness, who we really are, dependent on everything from the food we eat, to the air we breathe to God in whom we have our being. And when we ignore our dependence, our createdness and connectedness - as we explored in a sermon before I went on holidays- we can end up with a way of thinking and being that turns our lives into a zero sum game (that is, whatever one player wins the other loses). Pride brings us to this place where if someone else is receiving admiration I must be receiving less; if someone else is doing well, I

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<sup>1</sup> Williams, Rowan, *Apatheia and the Passions*. A series of lectures give at Mucknell Abbey UK. <https://mucknellabbey.org.uk/apatheia-and-the-passions-talks-by-rowan-williams/>

must be doing less well. This very often leads us to the need to establish what we feel is rightly due to us no matter what it means or costs for others. And from arguing about who is greatest in the gospel to the letter from James saying 'you want something and do not have it and so you murder' gives us sense of the breadth of this. And this paradigm of a zero-sum game is at the heart of so many of our wars, so much of our economics and resource extraction and indeed even our personal relationship dynamics.

"Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all," Jesus says this morning, placing a child in the midst of the disciples. Children in Jesus day lacked social status and legal rights: a child was totally dependent on others and one could not expect to gain anything socially or materially from kindness to a child.<sup>2</sup> "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me." Whoever welcomes this kind of dependence is able to welcome God, is able to grasp something of the necessity of death and resurrection, is able to welcome being wholly held and loved and dependent on God. Whoever can welcome being wholly held by and loved and dependent on God will discover that this is in fact real greatness. And this way of being in relationship with God, knowing our createdness and our connectedness to one another, brings us into the service all which is how you must live, Jesus says, if you really do want to be first.

God is revealed this morning as the God who refuses our notion of a zero-sum game and seeks to redeem it with God's own view and truth. Again and again throughout scripture this is the case: think of the parable of the vineyard where all the labourers are paid the same, or, of course, the prodigal son. Favouring one does not mean disfavouring others; signs of love and grace are given for the good of all. Christ calls us into his own life, in to the Body of Christ, where this is the reality of being: the gift of one person is not a threat to my own lack of those same gifts but they are there to enable my own gifts. The gift of one is a gift for all and likewise the pain of one is the pain of all.<sup>3</sup> It's a way of being we renew each Sunday as we gather around the Eucharistic Table, it's a way of being that we cultivate at The Gift Farm-Garden as we seek to show a way of being in relationship with the land and with our neighbours that has nothing to do with with a zero-sum game and everything to do with dependence, gift and grace. And this way of being is something we celebrate every time we welcome people into new ministries like we welcome Vivian, Soren, Carrie and Karen today. We celebrate knowing that gifts, when offered well, will bring life to whole Body of Christ and release the gifts of others in the community around us as we all depend on the God in whom we live and move and have our being.

"Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all," Jesus says this morning, placing a child in the midst of the disciples. Amen.

The Rev'd Anne Privett

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<sup>2</sup> As John R. Donahue, SJ, and Daniel J. Harrington, SJ, *Sacra Pagina* commentary.

<sup>3</sup> Williams, Rowan, *Apatheia and the Passions*. A series of lectures give at Mucknell Abbey UK. <https://mucknellabbey.org.uk/apatheia-and-the-passions-talks-by-rowan-williams/>