

WHAT WERE YOU ARGUING ABOUT?

Devotional for September 23, 2018 based upon Mark 9: 30-37

It seems to me that there are two kinds of arguments. There are worthwhile arguments, and there are worthless arguments. Some things are worth arguing about, while other things are not worth arguing about. I am sure that Jesus – in our Bible story for this morning – was very disappointed with His disciples and what they were arguing about.

Jesus had just finished telling them that He would soon be handed over to evil people and be killed and on the third day would rise from the dead. But His disciples did not understand what He was saying. But rather than ask Him about it, they began arguing over which one of them was the greatest.

There will be times – even in the church – when we will disagree with one another. But Jesus is saying, Don't go through life arguing about things that are not worth arguing about. If you are going to have an argument, make sure it is about something worth arguing about.

You can tell a lot about a person by the kinds of things he or she argues about. I think of some of the things that I have gotten into arguments about. As I remember and think about them, I am really embarrassed over them. And so Jesus, in our Bible story for this morning, asked His disciples, after they had arrived in Capernaum, "What were you arguing about on the way?" The Gospel writer Mark tells us, They would not tell Him. "They were silent," because they had been arguing about which one of them was the greatest.

They had been caught red-handed, discussing a subject that only revealed how self-centered and petty they were. They had been carrying on an argument over who was the greatest in the presence of Him who is the greatest. In the presence of total selflessness, they had blatantly revealed their self-ishness. In the presence of Jesus their arguments were pretty small and petty and worthless indeed.

"What were you arguing about on the way?" What do we argue about on the way? I think of some of the petty arguments at council meetings and congregational meetings that consumed time, wasted energy, divided people, and hindered the mission of the church during my years of ministry. Are the arguments that you get engaged (or entangled) in worthwhile arguments? Or are they worthless arguments?

Just think of how much it must have hurt Jesus to hear His disciples arguing about who is the greatest. For here is Jesus, trying to alert His closest friends to the gathering storm of suffering and death that He would soon be enduring. But while He was pouring His heart out to them, there they were, not really listening, but instead pursuing their own selfish discussion over who is the greatest. How much Jesus must have suffered over that. And how much He must suffer over the kinds of things that we argue about.

But notice something. Notice how Jesus deals with His arguing disciples. He does not become indignant with them and attack them, even though He certainly had reason and right to. He does not blast them with burning words, even though they certainly deserved it. He does not chastise them or correct them by Himself claiming to be the greatest, even though, with His supreme humility and sacrifice on the cross, He is the greatest. Rather He asked them a simple question, "What were you arguing about on the way?" And He turned that moment into a teaching moment, as He was and is so good at doing. He sat down with them and said to them, "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all."

The solution for worthless arguments does not come from stopping talking. For just as bad as a lot of arguing is the silence that can develop between people. The solution for worthless arguing comes from discussing things that are worth discussing, dealing with issues rather than attacking persons, and becoming a servant to other people.

There are some things in the church that are worth fighting for, like the deity of Jesus, the authority of the Bible, salvation by grace alone, Biblical moral values, the priority of mission, and the imperative of evangelism. But some of the other things that we can have our biggest battles over – those things are simply not worth fighting over. Let's make sure that what we argue about is worth arguing about.

I like the way that the New Testament letter writer James, the brother of our Lord and leader of the early church in Jerusalem, put it. "Be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to anger, for human anger does not produce God's righteousness."

Why did God give us twice as many ears as mouths? It must be that He wants us to do twice as much listening as speaking. When it comes to talking, may God give us the courage to speak and the wisdom to say what is worth saying.

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