

If a=b, and b=c, then...
Eighteenth Sunday After Pentecost
September 23, 2018
Gordon Wiersma

Text: Proverbs 31.10-31
James 3.13-4.3, 7-8a
Mark 9.30-37

There are some friends that you want to have, and other friends that you need to have – that’s the thought that’s come to mind for me the last few weeks in worship as the lectionary passages have all touched on the Wisdom Literature in the Bible – material more focused on life lessons than on systematic theology. And it’s not just Proverbs - the Book of James fits that vein of scripture too, speaking to the practicalities of community life. And this wisdom scripture has a certain kind of tone to it – which is why I brought up the 2 kinds of friends. Some friends are there to encourage you, build you up, tell you how great you are – I love those kinds of friends; but then some friends are there to be honest with you, to tell you the truth even when you don’t want to hear it – I...love those friends?! – those kinds of friends are less enjoyable, but very much needed in our lives. And if you’ve been tracking these passages the last few weeks, then you know that Wisdom Literature is that latter kind of friend – with a kind of brutal honesty about the consequences of the choices we make, a truth-telling that may not be what we want to hear but is what we need to hear.

Well, in what we heard today, I think the Gospel lesson takes its turn at this kind of tone - the story in Mark of Jesus and his disciples has a Wisdom tone of what we need to hear even though we may not want to. And in order to get at that, we need to take a pivot and do some math! Hooray for math! – I love math. A trivia item in my past is that I started out college as a math major – it didn’t quite work out for me, but I still love mathematics – even story problems! 😊

So for today, we need to deal with a particular mathematical principle, which you will find expressed in the sermon title – did you notice that? - if $a = b$, and $b = c$, then... how does that end...? No! – the answer is “then the train from Atlanta arrives 5 minutes before the train Boston!” 😊 No – you’re correct – the conclusion is: “then $a = c$ ”. And what is this called? – yes – the Transitive Property: if a 1st thing equals a 2nd thing, and that 2nd thing equals a 3rd thing, then the 1st thing equals the 3rd thing. It makes good sense – that’s what math does: it makes sense of things – and the transitive property is useful to help you figure all sorts of things out..

And the thing about math which true lovers of math understand, is that math puts in simple terms the way that things work also in the world beyond numbers – math has applications to decisions and relationships – and even to theology and the human spirit. Take for instance, today’s gospel lesson – because when I read it, what I thought was – aha! – the transitive property! – didn’t you? – I think it’s quite clear if you look. It starts with the disciples and their discussion along the road – a discussion they intended to keep private, but that Jesus asks them about: “what were all of you arguing about on the way here?” – well, they know – and Jesus knows! – the topic of the day was who was the greatest among them. It was the topic for the 12 men who were a particular part of Jesus’ inner circle. There are many others with Jesus, but there is a hierarchy that puts these 12 disciples at the top – and there at the top, they want to decide who is at the top of the top – who among them is the greatest is the focus of discussion, and of discord.

And we need to realize how understandable, how predictable, this all is. We are at a point in the Gospel of Mark when the ministry, the popularity, of Jesus has reached great heights. The disciples had believed in Jesus back when Jesus was a nobody – but now Jesus is riding a popular wave and the disciples are ready to reap the benefits. And that’s where the transitive property comes in. The disciples are with Jesus, and Jesus is very popular and important – so,

the disciples figure, that means that they are very important too. It all makes sense – this equation – connecting Jesus’ greatness to their own. But it can’t stop there – there is also the urge to distinguish who of them must be the closest to Jesus and therefore even greater than the others. So the arguments begin, and continue. You don’t need a math brain for this stuff – the transitive property as the disciples show it is firmly planted in the human heart and soul – firmly entrenched in human society. Value, importance, status, worth, is connected to, equated with certain things – and to be associated with those things is then for a person to have that same status and worth.

I suppose there are some obvious ways we do that. A person has money – money buys power and influence- that person is powerful. I am a citizen of the USA – the USA is important and powerful – so I feel important. I am a Christian – Christians have the truth – I have the truth. You can think of plenty of other examples – it’s always happening around us. In fact it can be a terribly efficient, terribly severe equation for life - it is an equation which by its very nature is set up to categorize and separate people – divided into worth-ful or not. Turns out that an argument over who is the greatest is working with an equation whose properties reflect much of the brokenness of our world. Just think who Jesus’ disciples have already left out of their equation – the other followers – all of the women. It’s an equation designed to diminish and exclude. You can find the equation all around us - and the arguments and repercussions it brings are more serious than the disciples arguing – our equations gone awry have to do with violence and war and abuse and mental illness and greed and hatred. No wonder a voice of wisdom, the voice of Jesus, might have something to say about this.

It is though, I have to believe, a misuse of this equation, the way the disciples are doing things – the problem isn’t the math; the problem is what they are putting into the equation. Because it seems to me that Jesus doesn’t throw out this whole transitive idea – Jesus reframes, refocuses it – perhaps restores, reclaims it. Jesus’ math works this way: would you like to be first? –

well, the first are the last – so you must be the last; you want to be the greatest? the greatest is a servant – so you be a servant. You can see what Jesus is doing – he is reframing, refocusing what the disciples connect to greatness. If one is able to change the focus of what gives you worth, then that changes the focus of life – if greatness has to do with service, then to look for greatness is to look for those who serve.

So that's better – a better kind of greatness: have everyone focused on being a servant – that would change things in this world. But I think Jesus takes things another step yet in this story. Because there is something still to address here – I mean, is the point of serving others really to distinguish yourself as greater than others – just another route to the top of the heap? There's something not quite right there- the whole desire to be greatest and first stands at odds with the way Jesus is teaching. And I think that's why Jesus takes things further by turning to a child: 'Here is a child – a child to welcome,' Jesus says. 'If you welcome this child, then you welcome me – if you welcome me, you welcome the God who sent me.' Here's a whole other use of the transitive property: to welcome a child is to welcome God. This is a whole different way to look at the equation of life – Jesus speaks of true life found in the places that will lead us to a connection with, a welcoming of God – and the way to do this, Jesus says, oddly enough, is by welcoming a child?!

What does that mean – to welcome a child? I'm sure it's not meant to be sentimental or idyllic – as nice and good a scene it is for Jesus to gather a child in his arms – children are about much more than hugs (and they aren't always so huggable) and the kingdom Jesus speaks of is about much more too. What are children like? – they are growing, learning – they are people who cannot fend for themselves – they are dependent- they are vulnerable. I wonder what it would be to focus on such things? - to focus on things that nurture, enrich, provide growth in the human heart and mind and soul; to enter into the places in life where people need each other, where a voice is needed for the vulnerable, a way for those who cannot make their own. The

way of welcoming the child sets up a different way of looking at life. It doesn't take a hierarchy of getting to the top and turn it into some kind of self-effacing lower-archy – where you keep putting yourself at the bottom so that you earn enough points with God to end up on top. What it does is equate true life with the web of relationships, commitments, community that have a spirit of welcome for, an embracing of the kingdom Jesus speaks of – being connected to places of vulnerability and need, places of nurture and growth – and finding in those connections the fullness of life. It is not about hierarchy or lower-archy – it is a welcoming of all into the fullness and connectedness of life of which Jesus speaks.

What a friend we have in Jesus! – yes, in the gentle and affirming way, telling us what we like to hear; and also in the fierce tone of wisdom: what we need to hear. Because whenever we argue about importance, Jesus confronts our conversations – shifts our paradigm to the greatness of service and the wisdom of the vulnerable. We can live with equations of hierarchy and lower-archy; or with equations that seek life-giving connections to God and to others. Followers of Jesus have chosen each of those ways – we have – been part of the problem as much as what is good. And that is why Jesus in the fierce truth of wisdom confronts those disciples, and us – but then does so by confronting us with a child. Because this is the wisdom that we are a part of is not the reign of power over but the reign of life with; and whenever we welcome and embrace others into that community of life, we welcome and are embraced by, our God. Perhaps in saying this, our Lord, the Spirit of Wisdom, tells us both what we like to hear and what we need to hear. Thanks be to God. Amen.