

“But they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him.” It’s a recipe for mischief isn’t it? Being in the dark and also unwilling to ask what’s happening. Not *understanding*, not *knowing*, is never the problem all by itself. Children—at least those who have not been traumatized—children are in a natural state of unknowing—curious, but not yet competent. Wise-women and sages from all religions and wisdom traditions practice returning to this state of radical openness to possibility. Being aware that we do not know and unafraid to admit that to ourselves is the attitude of a learner—the state that Shunryu Suzuki called “beginner’s mind.”

Fear is the ingredient that leads to trouble. Fear of displaying our ignorance, fear of losing control, fear of losing status or power. Adding fear to a lack of understanding will close doors to insight and wisdom. Adding fear to a lack of understanding can set us into a stance of defensiveness that unintentionally shields us against God’s transforming influence.

In the passages just before today’s reading, Peter, James and John witnessed the transfiguration. They saw Jesus in dazzling white clothes speaking to Elijah and Moses. Next, all of the disciples and a crowd of people saw Jesus heal and lift up a boy who was unable to speak and hear. And now Jesus has taken his disciples away to teach them. He describes once again how he will be handed over into human hands that will kill him, and that God will create a different outcome. Three days after being killed, he will rise again. “But they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him.”

The scene changes once again to the house in Capernaum, presumably Jesus’ house, where the teacher interrogates his students. “What were you arguing about on the way?” Instead of pondering among themselves why God would allow Jesus to die or what God hoped to

accomplish through the suffering of their teacher, they have been discussing who was greatest or what greatness looked like.

Maybe the fact that Jesus chose Peter, James and John to witness the transfiguration led them to wonder if the three of them were to hold some special place in the coming messianic kingdom. Maybe they were still puzzling over what Jesus meant the last time he told them of his impending death. He said that those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their lives for the sake of the good news will save their life. And if that weren't confounding enough, he had also promised that there were some standing there in the crowd who would not taste death until they had seen that God's kingdom had come with power. Is that what it would mean to be greatest in the new kingdom?

They clearly did not catch the lesson in the healing of the boy with the unclean spirit that kept him from speaking and hearing. When Jesus, Peter, James and John came down from the mountain and first saw the crowd around the disciples, Jesus asked, "What are you arguing about with them?" And now, when Jesus asks the question to his students, his disciples are also unable to speak and apparently to hear or at least to understand. "What were you arguing about?" he asks.

But they fall silent.

Despite their teacher's implication that the coming kingdom will be different than the kingdoms of this world, the disciples continue to think about power and authority in terms of empire. What does it mean to be greatest? A squabble over honor status would have been the typical way to engage the question for these ancient Mediterraneans. Finding one's place in the pecking order was the way to find peace and order, even if it was the peace and order imposed by the brutal oppression of the Roman Empire. Finding a beginner's mind? Quite another story, and possible only with the most gifted, patient and resourceful teacher.

Once again, Jesus assumes the posture of a teacher—he sits—and he summons the twelve to offer them a learning experience. Not an explanation, mind you, but a disorienting encounter that will transform the

way that they think about power and about kingdom. “Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.”

This is a drastic reorientation of the priorities of empire. The world of dominator hierarchies is fueled by the pursuit of rank and status for oneself, the exercise of power over others and the promise that those at the top will be special. It is a seductive worldview.

Jesus offers something different—something that transcends. Hierarchy is not the problem. Nature is filled with examples of life-giving and liberating hierarchies. The kingdom of God that Jesus has brought near removes fear from the mix. In God’s kingdom, natural life-giving hierarchies are no longer fueled by the pursuit of rank and status for oneself, but by service to one another. The exercise of power over others is replaced by the exercise of power with and on behalf of others. And the natural human desire to feel special oneself will be fulfilled to the extent that we all treat each other as special.

To emphasize how close at hand this vision is, Jesus takes a child into his arms and says, “Whoever would embrace one of these children in my name embraces me; and whoever embraces me, does not embrace me but the one who sent me.” This is the answer that Jesus gives to the questions that the disciples will not or cannot ask.

By identifying so radically with a child, by embracing the road to rejection, suffering, death and resurrection, Jesus redefined both greatness and God-ness. It is not in the glory and honor of the Caesars, but in the vulnerability of a child that we encounter God.

In the ancient world, children were powerless people ranking only a little above a slave. So to place a child in their midst is to stretch the disciples well beyond their habitual way of thinking. With this simple action, Jesus invites the disciples into a state of unknowing but without fear—to sit with their inability to understand, but with their own childlike curiosity active.

The disciples can stop looking at themselves and open their eyes to see new possibilities right there in their midst. What they see is amazing. Not only is this the first time in Mark’s Gospel that Jesus has identified

himself as God's authorized representative, but he has also granted unprecedented power and authority to this child and the powerless people that she stands for. "Whoever receives one such child in my name..." Behind this statement is the principle of Jewish law that a person's representative holds the authority of the person themselves. According to this rule, for example, an authorized representative could negotiate a contract and make binding promises as though they were the person they represented.

Jesus claims the authority to represent God and with the same breathe grants it to the child. For her part, the child illustrates in real time what it is like to be with Christ with beginner's mind. Eyes open, full of curiosity and receptive to as much as possible in the new and exciting world she is encountering. The disciples will find and receive God's power when they pass it on in service. The exchange of God's power will spread and grow as the disciples serve others. The disciples will serve those who, like the child, trust Jesus, but have much to learn as representatives of Jesus and the One who sent him.

When Jesus began this teaching, the disciples were silent. Silence is often a defense mechanism to preserve the appearance of competence, but it backfires eventually. By clinging to absolute certainty about what we know and who we are right now, we unwittingly sacrifice what we could know and who God has created us to be.

Only when we relax our grip on our unquestioning attitude can God open us to what might become, drawing us deeper and deeper into Christ's compassion. Into the very heart of compassion that we embrace and receive in the bread broken and wine mixed at our Eucharistic table. We move more deeply into the mystery of why God would care enough to send Jesus to us. We move more deeply into the mystery of why Jesus allowed himself to be broken for us and then rose again to embrace and receive us in compassion. We ourselves learn to become willingly wounded by the suffering of others; to willingly extend the compassion of Christ to all without distinction. "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all."