Wonder and Wisdom for Creation

Season of Creation II, September 19, 2021

James 3: 13-4:3, 7-8a Russell Mitchell-Walker

Mark 9: 30-37

This week our Craft/Study group started reading See No Stranger by Valarie Kaur, which begins with this reflection of her as a child:

In the beginning there was wonder. Out in the country, far from city lights, the night air was clear enough to gaze in to the long shimmering galaxy that stretched across the sky. I would stand in the field behind our house and talk to the stars like they were my friends, just like I talked to the cows over the fence or the horses across the road. Once while playing in a stream, I saw a butterfly dancing over the water and put out my finger and asked it to come to me – and the butterfly came. It perched on my finger for a long time, long enough for me to peer closer at its wings and praise it before it flew away. Back then there was no question: the earth under me, the stars above me, the animals around me were all part of me. And wonder was my first orientation to them all, the thing that connected me to them: *You are a part of me I do not yet know.*

The wonder we have as children is a gift, and can connect us to earth, to the wonder of God’s creation. As a child we seem to have more curiosity and imagination than we do as adults. It is this wonder, curiousity, and connection to the earth that makes many children sensitive to the climate crisis we are in, seeing it as the emergency it is. It was just a few years ago that Greta Thunberg said that our house is on fire and we need to act like it. Some thought she was overly dramatic. Yet this summer we have experienced our house, our country, literally on fire, destroying whole towns. On top of that has been extreme heat and the drought that comes with it, continued increase in hurricanes and typhoons in the parts of the world, torrential downpours when it does rain, and the warmest temperatures ever recorded in the arctic. As we observe the Season of Creation in the church, it is important to reflect on these realities and honour the children who are calling us to action, by doing what we can.

Jesus recognized the importance and wisdom of the children. The disciples seemed a little slow (some would say downright stupid) about Jesus’ message which often turned the status quo upside down, and didn’t understand his prediction of his impending death. So much so that after Jesus predicts his betrayal and death, they end up arguing about who among them is the greatest. As Pastor, theologian, and anti-racist educator Jo Luehmann said at Wild Goose Festival a few weeks ago when she preached on this passage: They have been with Jesus for three years, and they still don’t get that he and his message is not about greatness in the worldly sense. That he is fighting for people, not greatness?! Luehmann said, even at the last supper, they ask ‘who will sit beside you Jesus?’ Jesus could have responded ‘After all you have seen me say and do for the poor the outcast, those who live on the margins, that is your concern??’ In this instance in our reading from today’s passage, he responds by sitting them down and telling them that “whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all”. Then he brings a child into the centre of their circle and embracing the child, tells them “whoever welcomes a child, welcomes me”. Jesus indicates that a child, one who has little to no standing in the community, who is at the same level as a servant or woman, is the one who needs to be welcomed, honoured, respected, and when we do that we are welcoming, honouring and respecting Christ. Jesus puts the most vulnerable in the middle of the circle and then embraces them, inviting us to do the same. It is a view of justice that follows the line of thinking that I don’t have enough until everyone has enough. It moves from scarcity to abundance. It also centers the vulnerable, the marginalized, the powerless as the ones to lift up and honour and welcome.

In Jo Luehmann’s reflection on this passage and the challenge of greatness, she names that we are often playing the same game as the disciples. We think we are great when we allow someone like her, a queer, Hispanic woman, to speak at an event; when we invite someone who is powerless or oppressed to the table or to a place on the ladder. However, she says the table and ladder need to be destroyed because it is built on the backs of her brothers and sisters. She says we need to come down and feel the pain of those at the bottom. She is not looking for an acknowledgement of their pain, she is looking for us to lay down our power. Jo says “we need to stop playing ‘who’s the greatest’, because it is killing my people. We need to work together for heaven on earth, and create a new community.” This is what Jesus is talking about when he brings a child into the circle. It is creating a new community of loving all and bringing the powerless and vulnerable into the circle so all will be honoured, all will have enough.

Can we listen to the children and act with the children to address the climate emergency that it is? Can we vote tomorrow in a way that reflects this commitment? Can we vote for the children, our children? We are in the midst of a global pandemic emergency and we didn’t hesitate to take measures to address what was needed and to do our best to flatten the curve, and curb the spread, when it started. Now, we have not done as well lately and we might be able to say that our focus on worldly greatness, the economy, and power, won over caring for the health of the community. We have come no where near the same kind of response when it comes to the climate emergency we are in. We might say here, too that our seeking greatness and dominance over resources, and the need to fuel our economy has come at the expense of creation. Are we prepared to address that and put the earth, and our children who will experience the effect of our efforts, first? That is our calling and challenge which will take wisdom and imagination.

The kind of wisdom James talks about that is from God. Wisdom that is pure, peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy. If we had this kind of wisdom in our provincial leadership during this most recent fourth wave of the pandemic, we wouldn’t be in the situation we are presently in, with health care workers and systems overwhelmed. Being willing to yield, to change one’s mind with humility before things get out of hand is an important characteristic of wisdom. This kind of wisdom that James names, is what creates real community, as well as caring for the earth.

Willingness to yield is connected to curiosity. In the beginning of this message I read a passage about wonder. Wonder and curiosity and imagination are all linked, I believe. Casey Thornburgh Sigmon in the Working Preacher commentary writes: “Curiosity is a wise posture born of a willingness to yield. Judgment is not. It leads to defensiveness and may cause us to miss out on an invitation from God to try something new. But I also hear in this verse the idea that God has a willingness to yield to us rather than to love us by control and domination.” Many of us have learned that the God of control and domination is not a God of love, is not the God we have come to know in the gospels. If we can be curious, and open to our imagination, to wonder again, might that open up new possibilities for life and love and caring for creation? What would happen if we embraced children and truly gave them standing as Jesus did? Are we making space for them during this pandemic as much as we are for adults? Are we honouring their concern for the planet? May we draw on the wisdom of God, to do better, to be better, to make sure there is enough, to move from scarcity to abundance, and create communities of wonder and imagination.

May we be open to letting go of greatness and worldly ways that lead to death and suffering, both for our brothers and sisters and for the planet. May we be open to the wisdom from God, that will bring justice and peace to our communities and creation.