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In the Middle of an Argument
Church of the Good Shepherd, Athens, Ohio

But the disciples did not understand what Jesus was saying and were afraid to ask him. – Mark 9:32

I don't remember every argument my husband and I have. But one that I have not forgotten happened during the first year of our marriage, when we were about to move from Wisconsin to Ohio because I had been called to a parish in this diocese. One of the many steps involved in an already complex process was we needed to get permission from his ex-wife to move because we were moving more than 150 miles from her. We had to do this because their daughter was in my husband's full care and custody and was under eighteen years old. It is a legal requirement to make sure one parent doesn't move a child without the other parent knowing about it. In other words, even though his ex-wife was not participating in parenting, she still needed to know where their child lived. However, when he informed his ex-wife of the move and the need for her to approve it, she did not understand the purpose of the rule, and instead of asking, she refused to give permission. This caused conflict, because at first, Michael and I didn't know how that would affect our move. So, we did what people sometimes do when we get news that makes us anxious, stressed, and threatened our plans and calling: we argued. I don't remember what we argued about. All I remember is at one point Michael must have asked why we were fighting, and I answered by admitting I was afraid. Then he spoke words that not only stopped the argument, but they also deepened our relationship when he said, "I'm afraid too. Can't we just be afraid together?"

Another preacher described our fight this way: "When we hear news that is bad or confusing, we can become afraid and turn to arguments about less important issues, fighting and bickering amongst ourselves in an effort to feel like we have some control when the news itself shows we don't."

In these days when there is bad and conflicting news about the pandemic, or violence in schools, or legislation or the wildfires that are all over our country, perhaps any one of us can find ourselves resorting to fighting or bickering about other issues, perhaps with those we are close to. Maybe there is something

cathartic about those fights. Maybe they are ways to make us feel a little less powerless and a little more like we can control something when so much feels like it is out of control. Maybe it helps to find a way to feel better about ourselves by finding someone else to blame for the bad news: whether that person is a member of a political party, or from a different state, or different gender, or color, or climate change denier, or the wealthy, or the poor, or even whether or not they are vaccinated. When we are feeling powerless, frustrated, discouraged, or scared sometimes fighting makes us feel better.

This perspective might help us understand what was going on with the disciples in today's Gospel and how they responded to Jesus' teaching about his suffering, death, and resurrection. This is not the first time in Mark's Gospel that Jesus taught the disciples his messiahship isn't about wealth, prestige, or military might. Despite hearing this message before, the disciples didn't grasp it or understand it yet. And they won't. They weren't able to process these events until after they had happened; after they themselves had been face to face with the Risen Christ and later were inspired by the Holy Spirit.

So, when we heard this morning that as they followed Jesus the disciples were not talking about what he had told them, they were fighting amongst themselves, maybe we might recognize in their behavior some of our own tendencies. Which is important because of how Jesus responded to their fight.

He didn't yell at them. He didn't put them down and belittle them. He didn't call them names. He asked them a question that brought him into their fight. I like when Jesus asks questions in the Gospels because they are questions that get to the heart of the matter, like when my husband asked me why we were fighting. But where I expressed the reason, the disciples were silent. That seemed to be okay though because even if they didn't articulate it, Jesus knew they were fighting over status, and he seemed to know why. Since they didn't understand and were afraid to ask Jesus' about his interpretation of the Messiah, it seems they fell back on their interpretation and fought over who would be the most important.

Then, as a way to continue his teaching about what it means to be the Messiah, and to follow him, Jesus did something that we modern readers of the Gospel might find adorable but at the time was unexpected. Jesus embraced a child as an example of what it means to be last instead of first.

In Jesus' day families certainly loved their children, but children were not seen as adorable or innocent or precocious like we think of them today. When Jesus sat a child in the midst of those who were following him, he did so because the child was a person without power, without prestige, without status, without any of the things the disciples had been arguing about. A child in Jesus' day represented someone who was vulnerable and powerless, utterly dependent on others.

"Whoever welcomes one such child in my name, welcomes me, Jesus said in our Gospel, "and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me."

Lots of times this verse is used by parishes to gage how welcoming we truly are. The sign over there in our yard says, "The Episcopal Church Welcomes You" and every once in a while, it is good to step back and assess how we are really living into that promise. That doesn't mean being a door mat or accepting abusive behavior. It does mean not shunning or fearing someone who is different. It makes us consider: do we treat all visitors well? For example, are we welcoming the incoming OU freshman the same as we would welcome the president of OU? Are we more worried about a person's vaccination status than whether or not they have a place to sit and have all the things they need to join the worship service? Those are good questions to ponder and follow up on.

Today I also want to suggest we take the Gospel one step deeper and look back on the disciples and their response to being confused and afraid. Maybe they were tired too. Maybe they needed a break from reality, from Jesus' teaching. And maybe, there are times when we have more in common with them than we do with Jesus or the child he put in their midst. That's not wrong or bad, necessarily, not when we remember the lesson Jesus gave that applies to all of us who follow him today. That there may very well be circumstances when we will get weary, discouraged, frustrated, or scared. It happens to us all. Maybe we'll even start catching ourselves making snide comments, or blaming someone, or the other ways we can project our anger onto someone else.

And when we catch ourselves in that situation, whether in our personal lives, or parish life, or school or work, maybe we can ask the question: why are we doing this? And maybe we can practice the vulnerability of the child Jesus showed his disciples by answering, honestly whatever we are feeling. Like I did 8 years ago when my husband and I were arguing. In that moment, something beautiful happened. That is when the Holy Spirit entered into that argument. Because my

husband practiced the same vulnerability by stating his shared fear and asking, “Can’t we be afraid together?” It was a good question. One that ironically had power to dispel our fear and bring the calm and peace of Christ into that moment in our lives. Once again, Jesus had put a child in our midst – not literally, but figuratively – by naming our shared fear and asking can we just be afraid together.

Asking a vulnerable question and answering with that same vulnerability is the very thing that conquered our fear and empowered us to live into the challenge that turned out to be work and expense but not the threat we had feared. And it made our relationship stronger, it was a growing moment for us, making us stronger to face not just that reality but future ones with grace and kindness.

There are a lot of arguments going on right now, a lot to fight about. Perhaps today’s Gospel gives us the gift to realize we don’t have to be in the middle of all those fights, trying to win, or come out on top, or be the most important. Perhaps it can be empowering to remember the value in asking questions, especially the ones we are afraid to ask. We can bring vulnerability, honesty, and grace to face the fears and worries and anxieties and challenges of our present time. We can do better than fighting by facing reality and all that goes with it together, even if that means grieving together, for when we do, that is when, like my husband and I discovered, that we aren’t alone. Jesus is present, incarnate with us, through that vulnerability. It is one way we can grow closer to each other and to God and that is what can make our world more like God’s Kingdom even in the time we are in.