My brothers and sisters in Christ, let us pray. Lord of our Hearts, Minds, Souls, and Spirits, may the words of my mouth and the meditation of all of our hearts always be acceptable in Your sight, our strength and our Redeemer, Amen.

This week’s lesson gives us a lot of what last week’s lesson gave us, doesn’t it? Jesus is once again talking to the Twelve and passing through Galilee. They are “on the way”, which in Mark is the classic and repeated phrase referring to the path of discipleship defined by Jesus’ own life of service, which culminates in his death on the cross. And Jesus is again instructing his inner circle about the crucifixion and resurrection. He does this repeatedly to tell them, and hence us, not just what it means, but that it has to happen, and perhaps to them, as the gateway to understanding God’s fulfilling promise for Creation.

And they’re back in Capernaum, where he shook up the crowds in the synagogue after healing Jairus’ daughter with all this talk about being the Bread of Life. The Gospel of Mark uses another phrase repeatedly, “he was in the house”, to indicate that he was in private with the Twelve and not out in the public arena. He had a big argument with Peter, who on behalf of the disciples, had tried to talk him out of what he was saying. The disciples, more often than not, just can’t handle what he’s saying, just like in the Bread narratives. They react with misunderstanding, confusion, and an inability to understand his message. But God knows our hearts, even when we find it hard to confront our own fears and doubts.

So the disciples are not only afraid to ask Jesus further about his death and resurrection, but he catches them again after walking for the day. “What were you arguing about on the road?” And they knew that they had been caught doing something he wouldn’t have approved of. Just like in our Message for All Ages today, they react like children caught doing something they know they shouldn’t be doing. Can you see it? If you were there, they all look away, or down at the ground, and mumble something to the effect of, “nothing”. But this nothing is something, for sure: who is the greatest?

Now, for those of us who are sports fanatics, we can say in every generation who’s the greatest. It was Babe Ruth in baseball, until it was Henry Aaron if we’re thinking hitters. Or if you’re thinking pitchers, was it Bob Feller, Bob Gibson, or Sandy Koufax? It was Eric Dickerson in football, until it was Emmit Smith. It was Mark Spitz in Swimming, until it was Michael Phelps. Tom Brady’s on top now, until he gets passed up. And there’s a bunch of folks who still believe Muhammed Ali when he said he was the greatest. The point is that men are pre-occupied with who’s the best.

Think about it: men want to know who’s in charge and who holds the power. Companies are often headed by ex-military folks who do the exact same thing to their organizations and the employees within them. I’m convinced that they don’t let more women in the boardroom because questions would change. Companies still need to know about goals, but they would also need to figure out how to meet those goals in ways that are bigger than their companies, respecting the entire social and work environment rather than seeing people as resources that can be so easily replaced. Church hierarchies are no better than in the secular world. Those structures were created by white men years ago to create doctrine and rules that have nothing to do with God and God’s purposes here on earth, but rather to enforce rules that they’ve made up over time and only now are being hard pressed to let go.

These men who are apostles here are so busy jockeying for position, for who can sit closest to Jesus, who has his ear, who might be his favorite, that they are incapable of comprehending, much less accepting, the words about himself and his suffering and death. It’s so hard for us to open our eyes to see, our ears to hear, once we shut down with our fears and pre-suppositions about something or someone. We should learn that their very human reaction is not a lack of intelligence, but just the inability to see the whole picture before them, or what social scientists call Systems Theory.

General systems theory looks at how component parts of a system affect the whole system as well as input, output, and feedback loops in systems. Social systems theories rebut our modern belief that individual dysfunction and psychological problems originate mainly within the individual. Social systems theories hold that individuals could not be viewed as islands, but viewed as component parts of groups, organizations, societies and families. And since we don’t know the disciples individually, this is really all we have in many glimpses of Jesus’ ministry; he says something, and they respond as a group. Jesus doesn’t berate them here; he merely sits down and says that greatness is not determined by the normal metrics of fastest, biggest, smartest, wisest. Like so many things, it’s bigger than that, fellas.

Jesus takes a child in his arms, and it demonstrates what he says almost without saying it. Kids aren’t in charge of anything in the ancient world. In the Gospels, children are the classic image of powerlessness—children don’t have a claim to property, people, money, kingdoms—they have no claim on anything or anyone, and they have no ability to reward or repay. This is important, and if you remember nothing else about today’s passage remember this (say preceding sentence again).

So the faithful disciple of Jesus attends to the child among us, and not only give them attention, but welcoming them, and serving them. And we do this not to get a reward. But we do this because this is the life in the Kingdom of God, to welcome those without claim to anything in this world. We do this because God has affirmed this servant life through Christ’s resurrection, which says we should love one another because God loved us first.

I’ll leave you with these final thoughts.

We’re coming out of the busiest week we’ve had around here since the Pandemic began, with Greenland’s 300th now in our rear-view mirror. In looking back, how did we do? Not in terms of numbers. But were we able to see the stranger in our midst, those seeking with questions, and how did we respond? Were we able to put on their eyes to see ourselves, and respond accordingly? Or did we boast of ourselves without answering the questions? Who came into our sight this week, and what did they find?

And how about within our congregation? Do we see one another as parts of a system of service to Christ and one another, or persons who remember our long-ago hurts and grievances toward our neighbors and friends? How can we recommit to a spirit of seeing ourselves as children of God, and to bring along those who don’t share our views in a more inclusive spirit?

One of the greatest dangers of emerging from our Pandemic existence is not ignorance of things but ignoring itself. It may be our greatest test of character yet, to undertake the hard work of loving one another as we find our mission on the way.

Thanks be to God, Amen.