

**'Leaving space' a sermon based on James 3:13 – 4:3, 7-8a and Mark 9:30-37
preached online by Kerry Enright as part of the Knox Church ministry on 19
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The disciples heard Jesus say - "The Son of Man will be betrayed. He will be killed. He will rise again." Then they started arguing. I wonder if it went like this. One says to the other - Did you understand what he was talking about? The other replies. No idea! His strange ideas make no sense to me. He's said it before, but I still don't understand. It's so bleak. When things are moving along nicely. Crowds gather. Some find new life. Some find healing. Some get food. People are released from taboos. We're sailing along and he keeps talking about betrayal, murder, and rising. Then one says. Look I can understand why he's bleak. I am not surprised he speaks like that. Look at us.

Simon, you are such a loud-mouth. We are making progress then you shoot your mouth off and everyone gets anxious. You're impulsive. That getting out of the boat! You blurt out words before you even understand what you are saying. And another says ... And then there's Andrew. Andrew, you are so shy, and reticent and quiet and reclusive and slow. A wet blanket. Really, we carry you. And another says ... And Thomas. You're so cautious, risk averse, holding us back, wanting to double-check every decision. And another says ... and Judas. Lost in the detail, balancing the numbers, keeping the budget, never lifting your eyes. And so it went on, making comparisons, highlighting frailties, identifying weaknesses, puncturing confidence, building defensiveness and they argued about who was the best.

We have experienced those times in organisations, workplaces, churches, politics. Exaggerated by social media where people circle the wagons of like-mindedness and certainty, firing arrows at those who might hold different views, digging deeper and deeper into their bunker. It is really hard to break that pattern once it starts, really hard. So our society becomes polarised and we imagine there is no truth but our truth. Ugly diatribes. Playing the person and not the idea. Seeing no truth in people who might vote for a different party or belong to a different church. It's scary.

Jesus must have despaired. Here was God offering new life and hope and love and peace and joy. Here was the son of man facing the abyss of betrayal, killing and rising. Here was magnificent truth. Here was beauty and brilliance, and instead they went miserly. They spat on each other. Missing the point. Then Jesus turns to the children. An unlikely turn because children, women, and servants had no legal status. They were the least honoured. At the most, if they were male, they

were a potential citizen. Yet he pointed to the most vulnerable, to those at the outer edge of society. Children were the answer to the question of who is the greatest. And he did more than value children. He asks us to join them, to become as them, to be as vulnerable as them. And the promise is, that in becoming as vulnerable as they are, we are welcomed into God's embrace.

Choosing to be vulnerable takes away the effort we waste in trying to be self-sufficient. We make evident that we need other people, that we need other gifts, other contributions, other perspectives, other experiences. Less of me; more of us. That journey to vulnerability can be among the most challenging we make. Sometimes we learn it the hard way, when we are immobilised or hurt or left out or overlooked or unwell. There are times when vulnerability can be scary because it can seem unnatural in a culture that values success and power. And we often see around us people with inflated egos getting their way by pushing others aside. We see it every day. But Jesus says that such approaches are not life-giving. I have seen how that behaviour hollows out people and empties their soul and makes them very unattractive. What Paul might call clanging cymbals.

Our God is a god of grace. Grace makes space for others, reaches out to others, relies on others. When we are vulnerable, we are available to receive God's grace, to receive love, to receive God's Spirit. When we are full of ourselves there is no room in our hearts for the humble and holy one of God.

And what of the church? As Rachel Held Evans said: "But the gospel doesn't need a coalition devoted to keeping the wrong people out. It needs a family of sinners, saved by grace, committed to tearing down the walls, throwing open the doors, and shouting, 'Welcome! There's bread and wine. Come and eat with us and talk.' This isn't a kingdom for the worthy; it's a kingdom for the hungry."

When we lose our sense of importance and certainty and acknowledge our hunger we may find ourselves filled with what is truly important - grace beyond measure. Staying humble means being aware of, and admitting, what we don't know. It means being ok making mistakes and asking for help. When we are humble we open ourselves to continuous growth and learning. Amid all the angling for power and all the threatening poses we see today, aren't these words from James such a tonic?

"The wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy."

It seems James was writing to a church where people couldn't relate to each other peaceably. There was gossip and slander. People were angling for power and dividing the community. The book is in our Bible so we can learn that true

wisdom comes when we invest in the lives of others, when it is less me and more us, when we make space for others to flourish.

The father of David Tennant the actor was a Moderator of the Church of Scotland and visited Dunedin about 20 years ago. A few years ago, when David Tennant was receiving a prestigious award, they showed a filmed segment of David's father saying, among other things "One of the marvellous things about David is that he does not have an inflated ego. It means others are drawn to him." Seeing his father say that brought tears to David's eyes. That view was confirmed by the comments of his colleagues who spoke about how he made space for them and encouraged them.

In two weeks, Angela Merkel steps down from being Chancellor of Germany, a post she has held for 16 years. She doesn't live in the fine official residence near the Brandenburg Gate. She lives with her husband in the same small flat in which they have lived for years. She irons her own clothes, buys her own groceries and lives simply. A journalist recently said to her "Do you remember I took a photo of you in this same dress ten years ago?" She told him: "My mission is to serve my fellow Germans, not to be a model." She is one of the most respected politicians of our time, across the aisle, despite the unpopular decisions.

Whakatauki – E hara taku toa I te toa takitahi he toa takatini. My strength is not as an individual but as a collective. The wisdom from above is peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy. That is what we need in our world today.

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