

18th Sunday after Pentecost, Year B  
September 22, 2024  
Vince Katter, senior warden

Good Morning! For those who don't know me, I'm Vince Katter, current senior warden of St. Mark's. That is: I'm the chair of the church council (which is known in Episcopal-speak as the vestry).

My aim today is to reflect on the Gospel, and I'll take the opportunity to offer a brief update on two major items of our congregational life together — the state of our project to build a new parish hall, and the search for a priest to serve our congregation.

First, an update on our building project. My, what a summer! There has been a lot of discussion with the new Diocese of Wisconsin as we worked through details of the phase 3 funding and talked about our plans for the 1st floor space in the new building — the space that all be on the same level with the pew seating area of our church. With the backdrop of the creation of the Diocese of Wisconsin from the Dioceses of Milwaukee, Fond du Lac and Eau Claire, and calling a new priest-in-charge, some plans and discussions have taken more time than expected, but the outcome of that is that we have entered into a close partnership with our new diocese, and our builder. Perhaps the best news is that we will be able to occupy much much more of the 1st floor of the new parish hall later this year. Last time I reported about this, we thought we would only have access to a new bathroom and the nursery. Our goal, however, was to get more occupiable space sooner rather than later. We expect that by years end, we will have the nursery, the kitchen, the gathering space for coffee hours and events, \*all the bathrooms\* and the offices, and the meeting room. This is a much longed-for development.

In order to accomplish this, we will have a follow-up capital campaign to support this starting in 2025 and going through 2027— and that campaign will have a more modest goal than the original one — the one that you all have faithfully, and to many external observers, amazingly fulfilled.

Secondly, regarding the search for our next priest, your vestry is in the midst of interviewing two strong candidates to be our priest in charge. I anticipate a decision will be made by the first week of October, and that we will be celebrating the arrival of our new priest at or near the beginning of Advent. Please keep the vestry in your prayers as we make that decision.

OK — on to the Gospel.

Mark relates that story where Jesus is predicting his arrest, execution, and resurrection, and in response, the disciples are seized with both fear and ambition. This succession squabble echoes the plotline of so many dramas. Cue the shot of faces squinting at each other across a

table they are sitting at, maybe a cut to a hand gripping the table, etc., etc., etc.

We've seen this so many times, and while this makes for interesting screenplays — in real life, this sort of competition is frequently counterproductive, unless the goal is selling tickets to spectators.

The fact that Jesus sees what is happening suggests that Jesus has also seen this many times; he knows about human nature and power struggles and status, so he decides to call them on the succession squabble and the storm of 'me, me, me and my power' that is in his disciples' heads.

In my view, He adapts an idea from the Beatitudes, scaled and framed for group management. That idea is 'Blessed are the peacemakers for they shall inherit the earth' rendered here as 'Whoever wants to be first, must be last and servant of all.' In this situation, he is talking about the nature of appropriate leadership from His point of view, and how it relates to the classic leadership struggle.

And then he brings in a kid — a person that in the ancient world that had little if any personal power outside of the bond to a parent, and a pretty precarious individual existence until adulthood — and Jesus tells the disciples that they need to welcome the child as they would welcome him, noting that the welcome is never wasted.

A couple of things came to mind as I thought about this passage — why a kid?  
Cooperation, and peace.

The inclusion of a kid seems like there's a little bit of a setup by Jesus here to emphasize the topsy turvy nature of the leadership advice he's giving to the disciples.

Jesus' assertion of the inseparability of the leadership style he's looking for from the mission goal seems to be the point here:

You must welcome the vulnerable.

You must serve the vulnerable.

If you welcome only the strong and powerful, you are missing the point.

If you are striving amongst yourselves to determine who the most powerful is, you are also missing the point.

He calls them away from competition and striving, towards servanthood and peace, particularly for the least among us — and if the least among us can live in peace, the rest of us generally do pretty well.

A thought on cooperation — I've got a life sciences college background from the 70s,

back when we used clay tablets and slide rules. I've marveled at the number of times over the years that concepts from say, a seminar on the population ecology in jungle dwelling tree lizards, or a recent article on forest species dynamics spoke to issues that I ran into in my career in retail and corporate IT as well as in everyday life.

We tend to exalt competition as a way to determine the best individual of a group — and that \*can\* work to find out who gets the gold star. The challenge, of course, is that competitive ruthlessness is pretty damaging in practice, and competitive avoidance is a strategy that appears nearly everywhere in the biotic and business world.

Cooperation — more than just avoidance of conflict — implies mutual servant-like relationships between individuals and groups in a peaceful matrix. It is one of those concepts that kept coming back up, again and again, as a better way to describe what was actually happening when ecosystems seemed to be both fruitful, resilient, and frequently, beautiful.

I hear this passage calling us to embrace that.

Lastly, you can have 'peace' in a number of ways. There is the peace of the wasteland, the monoculture, an enforced conformity — silence and order in stasis and uniformity.

The peace of a garden, of a living diverse community operating in some harmony, is I think preferable, even if it seems a bit more chaotic at times. The diversity of viewpoints, ages, and experiences within communities that respect each other are the things that make those communities resilient and joyful, within our abilities as gardeners.

Nurturing a community that Jesus would feel welcomed into is a work of ongoing cooperation that needs peaceable care for each other, as we all journey together.

Let us consider how we use our time in the world this week to work for cooperation and peace for ourselves and for all those we encounter.

Amen.