

The Reverend Jon Hauerwas - July 21, 2019
“In Search of Wisdom”
Proverbs 8:1-4, 22-31 and Luke 10:38-42

Sooner or later, every parent with more than one child will hear these words: “Mom and Dad, you won’t believe what my sibling just did.” As soon as these words are spoken, experienced parents know exactly what is coming next. There is a 100% chance that the same child is about to tell you about a great injustice in which the storyteller will be the victim, while the other child will be cast as the perpetrator of a serious misdeed.

Children get it. They recognize from an early age that parents are the primary authority figures in their lives. The ones who can stop unwanted behavior. The ones with the power to rebuke and to punish. And the ones who can vindicate the innocent, if there actually is such a thing when two siblings are involved.

So when conflict arises, children are quick to draw us in, and garner our favor, and do whatever it takes to win us over to their side. Yes. The initial problem involved just the two of them. But, when a third person is invited in, the conflict has broadened. This is what psychologists call “triangulation.”

We've all experienced this, and we know that triangulation is not limited to family life. Instead, these relationship triangles are a constant feature of life in any community. They work their way into our friendships, where awkwardness ensues. They impose themselves into our workplaces, where colleagues become rivals. And they even sneak into houses of worship, where followers of Jesus grumble and complain about their neighbors.

In each of the churches that I have served, I have often heard something like this: "You know, it seems like the same people volunteer to do everything around here." Maybe you've heard someone say this, as well. Now, let's suppose that the pastor buys into this narrative and then shares it with others. Soon, a large number of new triangles have just formed. Seminary officials know that this is coming, so they train us to be cautious about choosing sides and placing blame.

Jesus, too, was aware of this danger. He recognized that people were often looking for simple, "yes" or "no" answers to complex and divisive issues. "Come on, Jesus," they goaded. "Pick sides. Choose your allies. Speak up and put *those* people in their place." Yet, that strategy was never very

effective. If anything, it usually resulted in a rebuke of the one seeking to triangulate him.

Our second lesson this morning is a great example of this, and I want you to notice how ably Jesus deals with the dispute between these two sisters. Here's the setting. Jesus has entered the home of Martha. He is there to receive her hospitality, to share a meal, to engage in table fellowship. The hostess is buzzing around, offering all of the appropriate gestures befitting the great teacher who is now a guest in her home.

And yet, just beneath the surface, all is not well. While Martha is hard at work, her sister, Mary, is sitting at Jesus' feet, absorbing the bits of wisdom that he has to share. The text tells us that Martha is distracted by many things. She's not living in the moment. She is irritated and resentful, not just with the current situation, but with memories of every conflict with her sister that predates this moment. Exasperated and sensing an opportunity for vindication, the hostess throws her arms into the air, and she demands a "yes" or "no" answer from the authority figure in the room, saying, "Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me!"

Between my undergraduate work and seminary training, I served as a Young Adult Volunteer of the Presbyterian Church. That year, I was assigned to work in a homeless hostel in Edinburgh, Scotland. Kara and I had just met. She was a fellow volunteer living in London, and in my free time, I took every opportunity to visit her.

I can still recall one of those trips to London. Kara was at work, and I was exploring the city by myself. I was in the underground subway system, known locally as the Tube. I had my map, but I was confused, so I decided to ask for help. I waited for the next passenger to walk down the hallway toward the train platform. He was wearing a suit and tie and carrying a briefcase. I kindly said, “Excuse me, can...” The man made eye contact with me for all of one second. He never said a word, looked straight ahead, and kept on walking.

Flustered and amazed, I waited for the next person to walk down the hallway. He was also dressed in a suit and tie. I said, “Excuse me, can...” After another brief moment of eye contact, he also quickly avoided my gaze, looked right past me, and walked full steam ahead. Now, I was not only anxious

about feeling lost, I was also angry. It seemed personal. I threw my hands up in the air and yelled, “I just need some directions.”

It was that moment when everyone in earshot realized that a crazy American was harassing Londoners underground. And from that point onward, every passenger that came my way gave me as much space as possible within those cramped quarters. Clearly, my response was out of character. It wasn’t my best moment. And soon, my anger gave way to embarrassment.

I wonder if Martha felt the same way when she threw her hands into the air and demanded, “Tell her to help me!” Jesus, now triangulated in the year’s old conflict between these two sisters, spoke gently. “Martha, Martha,” he said. “You are worried and upset about many things, but only one thing is needed. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her.”

After yelling at a stranger in an underground tunnel of one of the world’s great cities, I sulked over to the platform and boarded a train while everyone else kept shuffled away from me and kept their distance. I studied

the maps. I focused intently, and I ultimately made my way back home. Yet, that experience reminds me of how often our own worries distract us. We get so caught up in our own anxieties, so worked up about the stresses of life that we forget to do what's most important: to pause, and reflect, and observe a posture of humility.

As I draw to a close this morning, I want to leave you with this image of Jesus' disciples. One day, a group of them were traveling by foot on a dusty road when an argument broke out among them. The topic? Who would be the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. It was then that Jesus took a little child, placed the child at the side of the disciples, and said, "Whoever welcomes this child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me; for the least among all of you is the greatest."

Friends, amid all of the distractions and worries of our earthly lives, may we find the courage to be still and search for wisdom. May it be so, and all thanks be to God. Amen.