

There's an experiment I've encountered in continuing education where test subjects are shown a video of a basketball drill and given the instruction to count how many times the players wearing a certain color jersey pass the ball. After watching the video and finding out the correct count, viewers are then asked if they noticed anything else in the video...and statistically about half miss the person dressed in a gorilla suit walking right through the middle of the players. This experiment is used to illustrate how we can be so narrowly focused on what we think is important that we can completely miss something significant, even if it happens right in front of us. Today's readings all wrestle with the people of God missing the point.

Proverbs 31 is one of those misused and abused bits of scripture that historically has been beloved for all the wrong reasons. Embraced by denominations that narrowly limit the role of women, this passage has most recently been exploited by multi-level sales companies—one that is even named *Thirty-One*, to market their programs as a godly way for women to earn money from home in their presumed “free time” from their unpaid labor of child-rearing and housework. Of course, the wonder-woman described in Proverbs doesn't have free time, as she has to rise when it is still night to start working on all her many ventures, several of which require her to do business outside the home, and few of which concern domestic duties—tasks which she assigns to her multiple servant girls. Yet this passage is often misread literally and used to pressure women into not just doing more things but doing *everything*, even though it starts with the rhetorical admission that rarely can a person do all this, even with a household staff to help. Instead of a *prescription* to contribute more and more and more, what if this is a *description* of how much is already being done without credit being given where it's due; essential tasks that were under-appreciated because of who was doing them? In burdening ourselves or others with an unrealistic ideal, do we miss what is already worthy of praise?

James addressed early followers of Jesus who likewise were missing the call to live as God intended. They are embroiled in conflict because they are still living according to society's values of selfish ambition—putting themselves and their own desires first instead of following Jesus' example of selfless service. Their love for others was supposed to demonstrate their discipleship of Christ, but they were acting just like everyone else—focusing on themselves, satisfying their own wants, arguing amongst each other to get their own way. Luther criticized the book of James for not emphasizing the grace that Luther found so freeing. But James rightly points out that our faith hasn't accomplished much if we still behave just like people

who do *not* claim to have been transformed by the gospel. A life lived in Christ should look different than a life lived without Jesus; if it doesn't we've lost the plot.

Of course, the long tradition of Christian disciples missing what is right in front of them goes all the way back to Jesus' very first disciples who spent three years living, eating, traveling, and learning with Jesus, and still didn't understand what he was saying. Jesus begins predicting his upcoming betrayal and death—not so much as a mystical, divine revelation of the future but as the realistic expectation of the consequences Jesus will suffer for his non-violent revolution. The disciples don't understand what he's saying, and sadly, are afraid to ask him; so instead of learning more about Jesus and his mission, they revert to what they know: arguing amongst themselves about which one of them is the greatest. That is how human society works: hierarchies, haves and have-nots, people who count and people who don't; it matters who is the greatest if we're all competing in a zero-sum game where life is one pie and everyone is trying to get the biggest slice.

But nothing that Jesus had taught the disciples should have led them to expect that kind of ranking in Jesus' community. Jesus is the teacher who will call them friend, the master who will wash their feet. What does it even mean to be the greatest in Jesus' community? Whoever tries to win the prize for being the most humble automatically loses the Humility Olympics. So the one who wants to be first must be last, because putting others first is what Jesus did. To stop the disciples from fighting over which of them is the MVD, most valuable disciple, Jesus shows them a child. This child hasn't seen the transfiguration, like some of the disciples just had; the child hasn't driven out demons or healed people like the disciples had; the child can't proclaim Jesus' teaching and preaching like the disciples had; the child hasn't *done* anything to give him standing among the disciples. Yet Jesus says, *when you accept this child as an equally valuable member of this community, that's what will show that you finally understand what I've been trying to teach you.* Arguing about who is greatest misses the point by a mile; but reaching out in love, even to a little child who has nothing to offer in return—that's what it's all about.

As individuals or as the church, there are myriad distractions from the call of Jesus that is right in front of us, plenty to make us miss the divine mission to instead burden others, argue with others, compete with others, when what Jesus told us to do was to *love* others—to love our neighbors as ourselves until everyone recognizes us as disciples by our love. Whatever else we may try to make our faith about, Jesus made it about this: we love God by loving the people God has put with us in this world.