

Last week, we heard Jesus ask his friends and followers a really important question, Who do you say that I am? And we heard the response, you are the Messiah, the Christ, the one long-promised by God to come and make everything right again.

This week, and some things have happened between the two stories, this week we hear him ask them another question: what were you arguing about on the road? Although, it's important to note, that in the original Greek the word "argue" here has more the sense of a debate rather than a real disagreement, so that Jesus was asking, "what were you discussing? What were you talking about?" And, deeply embarrassed, they realized that their conversation about which one of them was the greatest, the best and most religious person, the best at this following Jesus thing, was kind of not appropriate.

I remember growing up and listening to my brother hanging out with his friends as teenagers, and they'd have similar arguments, although, of course, not about who was the best Christian. No, their disagreements was about who was best at hockey, or at video games, or who was the best with the ladies. Sometimes instead of arguments, it would take the form of showing off, and that was especially true if there were any girls around. And while it was all in good fun, there was something there, too, about a need to be validated or appreciated as these boys were growing into manhood, as they were maturing.

In my experience, girls do this differently. They argue instead about who is the worst, not the greatest. "I really sucked at that test," or "I'm so ugly" or "I'm so fat" or "I'm so stupid." Here, they are mostly seeking affirmation that they are not, actually, ugly or fat or stupid, and for the most part the people around them understand that's what's going on and they offer that affirmation. And as with the boys, it is a part of their process of coming to understand who they are as they mature into adulthood.

Now, the disciples may not have been teenagers, although they were probably not any older than their 20s. But they were certainly at this point doing many of the same thing teens do in our culture, trying to understand who they were and who they were going to be in the world, because their relationship with Jesus was such that it was demanding a whole new orientation to life.

Jesus talks about being betrayed and suffering and dying; then he talks about becoming a servant of all, and puts a vulnerable, powerless child forward as a model to be emulated. (And we need to remember here that children in that place and time, while of course loved deeply by their families, did not enjoy any particular status. In our culture, of course, children are deeply valued, there are entire industries that exist to cater to their every whim and desire; in Jesus's day, they were more or less just another

mouth to feed until they got big enough to be useful. They were just not important in the eyes of his society.)

It's easy to judge the disciples for not getting it. I mean, sandwiched between hearing that Jesus is going to die and learning that they should be servants and children, they're arguing about who is the greatest? Really? It reminds me of a character created on YouTube and other social media, who calls herself Mrs. Betty Bowers, America's Best Christian! She makes all sorts of satirical videos and writes scathingly biting parodies of the way Christians, and especially American evangelicals, so often present themselves in the media, as if they know all the answers and everyone else should do what they say.

But let me say this. The disciples in this story? They were taking this seriously. Who they were, and about how following Jesus was going to impact who they were. Maybe they were going about it the wrong way, if they were arguing about it, but they were seriously engaged in talking about what it meant that they were committing themselves to this new path. Like young women and men since the dawn of humanity, they were figuring out together their identity, who it was they were going to be in the world.

I have had the privilege of meeting a number of people who came to believe in Jesus in their teen or adult years, and I've had conversations with them about what that's going to mean for them. As one who was preparing for baptism said, it has to mean something about living differently from now on, doesn't it?

For those of us though, who grew up in Christian homes, I think a lot of us the this for granted. Don't get me wrong, I'm truly grateful for the blessing of growing up in a Christian family, for having been baptized when I was two months old, for my years in Sunday School and junior choir, for confirmation classes and for parents who bought me my own Bible when I was nine years old. I feel blessed to have always known Jesus.

But when you've always been part of church, it's really hard to say what difference being part of church makes in your life. When you've always prayed, it's harder to discern the difference prayer makes. Without some kind of before and after shot, it's not always easy to see how following Jesus makes my life different from anyone else's. Well, OK, maybe its more obvious in my life because of what I do for a living, but for those of you who work in the rest of the world, it's not always easy.

And I don't even really mean what difference it makes when others look at us. I mean what difference does it make to who we understand ourselves to be.

If someone asked you to describe yourself in five words, or maybe in 140 characters like on Twitter, what might you say? Maybe you'd say something about what you do for a living, or about your relationship with other people... Mother, IT expert, teacher, friend, uncle, grandfather, retired, cancer survivor, maybe your country of origin? Where on that list would Disciple or Christ-Follower or Christian come? Would it?

It has been said that the effectiveness of a church should not be measured by how many people come through the doors but by how many people living differently for having been there. Following Jesus means something about who we are in the world, how we think about ourselves, what we bring to every interaction and conversation we have.

Probably we won't be, like Betty Bowers, America's (or Canada's) Best Christian. Probably we won't, like the disciples, argue that we're the greatest. But we need at least to spend some serious time in the conversation, in the debate even, if you will, about what this whole following Jesus thing means for us. About what it means to live lives as servants in the world. About how we leave these walls and go out into the world prepared to be as vulnerable and powerless as a child, as a servant, following one who was ready to die to be that.

Because if we can't talk about it while we're with others travelling along the same road together, I'm not at all sure how we're going to live it.