

I can only imagine the scene on the road that day. So let's do that: let's imagine. The disciples were at the end of a long, long journey. For weeks they had been traveling through unfamiliar territory. Tyre, Sidon, Philippi, the Decapolis. Finally, they were heading back into good ole' Galilee, to the friendly streets of Capernaum, to soft beds and the home cooking of Peter's wife.

It had been an exhausting journey, but rewarding as well. They had seen miracles they couldn't imagine. Heard Jesus preach to thousands. And at this moment, Peter was still going on and on and on about the events on the mountaintop.

"You wouldn't believe how white his clothes were, guys. He was just... just... radiant! He was brighter than the sun. And then Elijah and Moses standing right there, like I had always imagined them from the stories. And Jesus privileged me over all of you to see it." The brothers, James and John, suddenly looked at each other and then bellowed out in thunderous voices true to their nickname.

"YOU?! We were there too, you know. And we didn't act like complete idiots by asking the ghosts of Elijah and Moses if they wanted to sleep in a tent tonight." Soon the argument was spiraling out of control. Thomas broke in quickly.

"You guys are all proud of yourselves for seeing a silly little vision. But we're heading back into Jewish land now, and you know how the Pharisee's hate Jesus. Its not gonna be too much longer before battle lines are drawn. And then we'll really see who's standing beside him. I know I will be." Others quickly spoke up to echo Thomas' sentiment and it looked like the discussion might subside, until Judas threw in his two cents.

"You know guys, it's kinda funny to hear you all so proud of yourselves when, you know... you are still just Galileans. I'm the only Judean that Jesus chose for this group. And we all know where good Jews come from." That was a challenge that couldn't go unanswered, and soon the Twelve were back at each other's throats, determined not to be beaten by their comrades.

It wasn't until they approached the city of Capernaum that the disciples finally let the issue rest. Catching up with Jesus, who had been walking all this time a ways ahead of them, they put on the happy, united front that they thought he wanted to see and finally entered the warmth of Peter's house.

A crowd was waiting for them, of course, people who had long ago figured out that Capernaum was Jesus' base of operations, and if they couldn't find him anywhere else, they would eventually find him there. Strangers, friends, relatives. Old and young. Parents and children. It was a small circus.

But the disciples reveled in it. They were superstars, afterall. Some of the most famous men in Palestine. Soon the previous argument was forgotten. There was enough fame to go around.

The thirteen men eventually gathered together in the common room of Peter's house and waited for a long anticipated supper to be served. Tearing apart a piece of bread, Jesus looked up casually.

"So what were you guys arguing about on the road?" The twelve looked at each other like students caught passing a note.

"Arguing? There was no arguing. I don't know what you're talking about." Jesus continued to press them.

"You sure about that? It sounded pretty heated to me. What were you guys talking about?" Peter shook his head.

"I... I don't know. Nothing important." Jesus' looked at them with an expression that told them he had heard every word they had spoken on the road.

"Whoever wants to be first must be the very last and the servant of all." The disciples scowled, baffled by the words. The first must be last and servant of all. What was that supposed to be mean? How can someone be first and last at the same time? And besides, they had been working their tails off for the last two months. They *had* been servants to all.

Jesus remained silent, however, quietly eating until he felt a tap on his shoulder. One of Peter's nieces, not more than 6 years old, had brought them a pitcher of water. Jesus took the oversized pitcher from her tiny hands and lifted the girl onto his lap. Smiling, he looked over at his disciples.

"Whoever welcomes one of these little children in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me does not only welcome me but the one who sent me."

That evening, the disciples gathered together, as they often did, to discuss what Jesus had taught them and try to make sense of His more cryptic messages. The first must be last. What did it mean? And what did it have to do with being nice to children? Peter shook his head.

"Children." He rolled his eyes. "A bunch of disobedient brats, if you ask me. I mean, really, they just get into trouble. You have a couple of kids and they're all so sweet, until they grow up. And they're out vandalizing yards. And the boys are getting into fights. And the girls are getting themselves pregnant. They're just not worth it." James quickly repeated Peter's sentiments.

"I know, I know. And they take so much of your time. I mean, you spend years raising the little buggers. And then what do they do? They go off to Rome and forget that they're even Jews anymore. So what was the point of it all." John started laughing and joined in.

"And they're expensive! You've gotta feed them and clothe them. And pay for school. And pay for religious training. And then they're always breaking things and taking your money and begging for this and begging for that. I mean, really... why in the world would Jesus possibly want us to put any effort into these kids?" The disciples shook their heads, laughing and joking about their shared family struggles. Until they noticed Matthew, sitting somberly to the side, his eyes wet with tears.

"What's with you?" They asked him. Matthew swallowed back his sorrow and looked up at his friends.

"You've missed the point entirely." The disciples scoffed.

"What do you know about children?" Matthew looked up.

"I don't know much about kids. But I know about disobedience. I was a tax collector when Jesus called me. I robbed my own people. And you Simon. You attacked Roman officials. And Peter, just a few days ago Jesus called you the mouthpiece of Satan. We're all disobedient. None of us deserves to be here."

"You talk about time? How much time has Jesus put into training us? Three years now. And after all that, we still don't understand half of what he tries to tell us. And yet, he's still here and he's still trying. And he still believes that there's something worth saving in our pathetic little minds."

"And cost? You were right, Thomas. We are heading down to Jerusalem after this. Yeah, there's gonna be a risk for us. But what about the risk to Jesus. They could arrest him. They could beat him. They could even nail him to a cross for what he's said and done. And for what? For us. So that we could hear about God's love. So that we could believe that the Son of God had come down to help His people. You wanna talk about expensive? We are expensive!"

"So maybe children aren't worth our patience or our time or our money. But we aren't worth God's patience, or God's time, or God's expense. We aren't worth God's love at all, and he still pours that out on us in quantities we can't even imagine. I don't know if I'm the first. I don't know if I'm the last. But I do know that God sent his first born to reach out in love to all of humanity, from the first to the last.

"Before we start questioning whether someone else should or should not be welcomed into the kingdom of God, shouldn't we ask ourselves: should I be welcomed in the kingdom of God? If God were just and fair, would I deserve a place by God's side? If God were just and fair, would I deserve all that he has already given me and all that he has promised to give me.

"If the Son of God wants to give grace to little children, even children too small to understand who he is and what's he's done for them, who am I to say he can't? If the Son of God wants to give grace to prostitutes and thieves and murders and liars, who am I to say he can't? If the Son of God wants to be led like a gentle lamb to the slaughter for the sins of the whole world, who am I to say he can't? Without God's grace, I'm as helpless as a little child and as dirty as any sinner who walked this earth. Who am I to say that God can't forgive me." Amen.