

September 23, 2018
18th Sunday after Pentecost
Columbia Congregational Church

Mark 9: 30-37
Servants of All

Sermon by the Rev. Betsey Polglase

Our passage from the lectionary this morning seems particularly appropriate to us today when we affirm and install the leaders of this congregation and commit ourselves to work together for the good of the whole church and in service to God. Being a Christian is more than saying all the right words and attending church once a week. Being Christian is what is in our hearts and what flows from our hearts into actions every day of our lives.

In the Gospel of Mark, Jesus is teaching his followers the social order of their day, indeed of our day as well, must be turned upside down. The old modus operandi of keeping up with the Joneses, or better, surpassing them in possessions and status, is not only counterproductive to the coming of the realm of God, but blocks our entry into it. We usher it in when we focus on something other than ourselves and our immediate friends and family.

Now, I must interject here, this does not mean we must denigrate ourselves, or ignore our own well-being. God wants us to live full and whole lives and to resist any forms of oppression or deprivation, for we are each in the image of God and most beloved. Woman, man, child or senior citizen we are precious to God and should be cared for gently and with mercy by our fellow human beings. In the Letter of James it is written, the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy” (James 3: 17). Just listening to those qualities, I find it calming. Yet, it is difficult to apply this message to our lives, lives too strongly governed by social norms and loud voices telling us what we should have and what we should be doing.

Peter, James and John are a product of their culture, just as we are. They see their world through the lens of a patriarchal hierarchy. It is no surprise they might feel they were favored by Jesus. Only those three, after all, had gone up the mountain with Jesus

and witnessed the transfiguration – his clothes becoming dazzling white with Elijah and Moses beside him. Together they heard a voice from heaven saying, “This is my Son, the Beloved, listen to him!” While they did not know how to respond to what they saw, they were amazed. Together they had experienced something of the Divine. Is there any wonder these three might think they were selected to sit in a higher position than the rest? They certainly would not want that sense of privilege turned upside down.

As they pass through Galilee on their way to Jerusalem, Jesus, for the second time, forewarns of his coming arrest, crucifixion and resurrection. After the last time when Jesus severely rebuked Peter, the disciples were afraid to question Jesus even though they still did not understand. And so they set their thoughts to worldly things as they followed their teacher. They begin to argue about who is the greatest until they come to a house in the village of Capernaum, a fairly large Jewish village on the Northern shore of the Sea of Galilee.

I pictured their journey with Jesus walking out ahead of the others, leading the way. I was reminded of travels when I was a child and travels as an adult with children in the back seat. As a child it didn't occur to me my parents heard what we sisters were saying. As an adult in the front seat, I knew what silliness and arguments and sweet sisterly talk was going on behind me, but didn't usually let on. And so it seems Jesus knew full well what the disciples argued about, as they entered the house in Capernaum. When the text states so plainly that “He sat down” we are to understand that he was taking the position of a Jewish teacher.

Jesus instructs his followers that leadership and authority is based on service to others, not on status based on birthrights or title. Jesus denounces the social hierarchy and lifts up a child. Though children, especially male children, represented the future of the family, their value was in their potential, only acknowledged when at the age of 13 they went through the rite of passage and then were suddenly adults and expected to act like one.¹ While they were still children they were worthless, powerless and vulnerable.

Today it seems many are so focused on the adults the children will become that they fail to let their children be the blessed beings they are: splashing in puddles, playing in the mud, running after birds, climbing anything climbable, marveling at a clover

¹ *Homileticonline, Prodigious Children of God, Mark 9:30-37, 9/20/15.*

flower, finding creatures in the clouds. Even when they are allowed such freedom, the children are also pushed to be the star player of a sport, the winner of the ribbons and awards, the most outstanding of all - if not pushed by their parents, then by peers and in their games and through media. How many shows are looking for the winner of the million dollars? What are we telling our children and ourselves is the most important thing in life? Certainly not what Jesus was teaching!

In today's passage, Jesus clearly began this teaching telling of the greatest rejection of all: his, by crucifixion. However, he then moves to show that there's no one we can ignore. Jesus brings into their midst an ordinary child - not a prodigy or an extraordinarily beauty, or promising athlete – just an ordinary child who is naturally humble, open, eager to learn, and willing to please. That ordinary child was to be put in the front of the line into God's holy realm.² Oh sure, they can be “noisy, clinging, destructive, self-center and surprisingly cruel”³ just like the rest of us. But Jesus is using the child to show that there is no one we can ignore, especially those outcast, vulnerable, and disregarded.

Indeed, a requirement of discipleship is serving the needs of those our social order treats as essentially nobodies. When we include them in our concerns we welcome Christ himself and thus welcome the One who sent him.

May God grant us the wisdom and courage to be servants to all.

Amen

Let us pray:

Jesus, your words are hard to grasp. They are contrary to much of what our culture promotes. You turn our perception of successful living upside down. By the power of your Holy Spirit, move us toward understanding your purpose that we may live to your glory. Amen.

² Ibid.

³ Barbara Brown Taylor, quoted by Kate Matthews, *Weekly Seeds, September 23, 2018*.