

OUR GREAT NEED
Post Christian and Presbyterian Churches
September 20, 2009
Mark 9:30-37

We all want to win or to receive the title of being the best at whatever we do. We stand a little straighter when we receive the title, “Student of the Month” or “Employee of the Year.” If it is high school or college sports, we pull for our team to be number one. Not only do we want them to win today, but we want them to win every game until the end of the season so they will be crowned number one in the district and then perhaps, the state. I believe that if we were all honest we would admit our desire for recognition and our need to be respected and acknowledged by the people in our midst. We all want to be the best at what we do and there really isn’t anything wrong with that aspiration.

Our Gospel lesson for today begins after Jesus had finished talking with his disciples about suffering, self-denial, and giving your life away. Now as they all journey to Capernaum, the disciples are scared, they have no idea what Jesus is talking about and they don’t have the guts to ask him to clarify his mission. So instead they begin to play the status game and discuss who is first, who is

best and who is the greatest. We all know how that game is played.

I think it is important that Jesus does not chastise the disciples or scold them for thinking about greatness. He does not tell them that they ought not to strive for greatness and Jesus does not try to make them feel guilty about their ambitions. He simply says they ought to understand what true greatness is really all about. So he sits down and begins to paint for them a clear picture of what constitutes lasting greatness.

Jesus says that in the kingdom of God, greatness comes when people of power choose to be of service to those who are invisible. Jesus says, “If you want a place of honor, you must become a slave and serve others.” Greatness, prestige, and honor in the kingdom of God are given to those who make themselves the servants of those who have no power.

Probably the most notable person in recent years to live the life of humble service was Mother Theresa. She and her Sisters of Charity of Calcutta dedicated themselves to humble service to the poorest of the poor, as she phrased it, ministering to “the distressed Christ in his many disguises.” In 1979, Mother Theresa received the Nobel Prize for peace over the objections of those who could

not conceive it going to someone who was not a politician. Her defense was simple; “Acts of love are works of peace.” Long after we have forgotten the present world political characters, we will remember Mother Theresa and because of her, our world will be a kinder and gentler place.

After Jesus tells his disciples about greatness being found in service, he takes a little child and says it is in how we receive this little child that we show whether or not we have received Jesus and have become part of his kingdom. Greatness in the kingdom of God is judged on how we treat the weakest and most vulnerable in our midst. Jesus said that when we welcome them in his name we welcome him, and that when we welcome him we welcome God. That is a pretty amazing equation if you think about it.

The Episcopal priest, Barbara Brown Taylor, says, “The disciples wanted to know who was greatest, so Jesus took a little child and showed them: twenty-six inches tall, limited vocabulary, unemployed, zero net worth, nobody but God’s agent; the last and the least of all.

She continues, “Do you want to spend some time with God? Then get down on the floor with little Sarah over there. Get finger paint

all over your clothes and laugh at her dumb jokes and never mind that you have important things to do, like finishing the laundry or earning a living. She is not filler. She is the main event. Opening yourself up to her is better for your soul than finishing a project or getting a raise or even reading a whole book of the Bible.

There will be no payback. Oh, she may shout your name next time she sees you and run to hug your knees, but you cannot list her as a job reference or ask her to lend you a hundred dollars to get your car fixed. She is not good for anything like that. She is not in charge of anything, she cannot buy you anything, and she will not ever remember your birthday or invite you over for supper with some friends. She has no status, no influence, or no income, which makes her great in God's eye. She is just what you need. And you, you are able to work on your own greatness by understanding that it is what you do with someone who does not count, when you think no one is looking, for no reward, that ushers you into the presence of God.”

When Jesus took the child and said that greatness in the kingdom of God is to be found in serving those who are vulnerable, those who are at the mercy of power, and those who are invisible, he did so because in parts of his world children were nobodies and didn't

count. Jewish culture valued children very highly, but the wider Greek and Roman culture in which Jewish people lived often did not.

The New Testament theologian, John Dominic Crossan explains that there was a brutal and widespread custom in the Mediterranean world of “casting out,” and abandoning babies who were unwanted. You simply put the baby out and it died of exposure or someone picked it up and raised it to be sold as a slave. This casting out of babies was fairly widespread and was based on the common assumption that a child was a non-entity, a non-person until its father accepted it as a member of the tribe or clan. If the father wanted a son, he simply didn’t touch his daughter and she would be abandoned. Crossan even cites a letter written one year before the birth of Jesus from an Egyptian worker to his wife who was about to give birth. It’s a chatty, loving letter and at the end the writer says, “If by chance you bear a son, let it be; if it is a girl, cast it out.” **(Also found in “Welcome the Child” by Rev. John Buchanan)**

In a sermon entitled, **“Welcome the Child” (Preached on September 28, 1997 at the Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago)** the Presbyterian minister, John Buchanan says that as the

early Christian church moved into the Gentile cities of that world, one of its distinguishing characteristics was the way it responded to this custom. Christians picked up the discarded babies and cared for them. The idea of adoption and the later idea of orphanages for abandoned, abused, or unwanted children were Christian ideas.

Therefore, in that environment and that world, what Jesus did by welcoming the child was a dramatic and revolutionary act.

Crossan says, “the act of touching and cradling and scooping that little child up into his strong arms and holding her—surely it was a little girl, just to punctuate the point—that act by Jesus, was the official bodily action of a father designating a newly-born infant for life rather than death and for accepting it into his family rather than casting it out into the garbage.”

In one of my all time favorite books, **Expecting Adam**, Martha Beck explains how difficult it was to be pregnant with her mentally retarded son while she and her husband finished their doctoral degrees at Harvard University. She said that they had very few friends and colleagues who supported their decision not to abort their son when an amniocentesis during her pregnancy revealed to them his Down’s syndrome. Most everyone at Harvard just assumed that she would choose to have an abortion.

Martha said, “I particularly remember one man in my class during a discussion leaning across the table and declaring to me, ‘It is the duty of every woman to screen her pregnancies and eliminate fetuses that would be a detriment to society!’”

Martha said, “At the time, I was too stunned and exhausted to do anything more than numb out. To this day I have no idea whether that particular classmate knew the details of my situation and although I don’t even remember his name, I still think about him. I thought about him when I read an expose of a Harvard-trained Latin American dictator who tortured and killed thousands of political opponents. I thought about him when we all discovered that the infamous Unabomber was a Harvard man as well—a genius, by all accounts.

I also thought about that seminar classmate on Adam’s ninth birthday. Adam had insisted on going to a pizza and games arcade for his party. The only person he’d invited besides his sisters was someone I’ll call Lonnie, whom Adam claimed to be his girlfriend. Although I had often heard Adam sing about Lonnie, I had never met her, or seen Adam interact with any girl. I was afraid that he would start humping her leg the second she came in range. These

were fears I'd sustained since before he was born when I thought all people with Down syndrome were grossly over-affectionate. I was grossly wrong as I have been about many things related to Adam.

Lonnie turned out to be a beautiful child who had a perfectly normal brain but had been emotionally damaged by an abusive relative during the first few years of her life. She appeared timid and wary in the crowded pizza parlor until Adam rushed to stand beside her. The moment she saw him, she relaxed and broke into a shy grin. Adam had donned his best suit and tie for the occasion. He graciously took Lonnie's elbow and guided her through the pizza parlor, clearing the way in front of her with his other hand, like a cross between a professional bodyguard and the Disney version of Cinderella's prince.

Lonnie's father had warned me that the rides would frighten her and that she would probably refuse to go on them. To everyone's surprise, though, Lonnie seemed completely unafraid as long as Adam was beside her. I will never forget watching the two of them on the miniature roller coaster, Adam's hand resting reassuringly on Lonnie's arm, their faces transported with identical and absolute joy."

Martha Beck concludes by saying, “If my classmate from the Harvard gender seminar of 1988 is anywhere out there, I’d like to speak to him directly. I’d like to ask him to put Adam on one side of the ‘screening scale’ and the Unabomber on the other, and then tell me who is the detriment to society. If the brilliant bomber wins out, I can only wonder, sir, exactly what kind of society you are trying to create.”

When Jesus took a little child in his arms, he reminded us that God’s values are not often our values. When Jesus took children into his arms and blessed them, he was not holding them up as moral examples nor was he wanting us to imitate them. He had probably seen how children can be selfish and rude, how they often throw fits or slam doors when they don’t get their way, or how they accidentally flush their cell phones down the toilet twice in one summer! In no way was Jesus ever asking us to imitate children; Jesus simply told the disciples that when we welcome children in his name we welcome him, and that when we welcome him we welcome God.

Barbara Brown Taylor so poignantly says, “However we chose to organize our lives, we have this little child to remind us that God

organizes things otherwise, and that if we want to welcome God into our lives then there is no one whom we can safely ignore. In the topsy-turvy kingdom of God, the most unlikely people are most likely to be agents of God—the ones who live in the world below our kneecaps, the ones who are stuck at the end of the line, and the ones who are always last. In God’s world, things are different and if you want to enter this kingdom, there is a way: go find a nobody to put your arms around and say hello to God!”

On the way to Capernaum, the disciples had argued with one another about who was the greatest. Jesus sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, “Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.” Then Jesus took a little child and put it among the disciples; and taking it in his arms, he said to them, “Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me, welcomes not me, but the one who sent me.”

PASTORAL PRAYER

Loving and Gracious God, we have gathered on this beautiful, autumn morning to worship You and to be fed by the spiritual things we can not acquire by our own very savvy resourcefulness, by working harder and longer, or by knowing the right people. In our search for greater meaning, purpose, healing and love, we are reminded that while we can survive on our own and even succeed on our own, we can never become human or whole by our own efforts. Help us, O God to understand more fully the concept of servant hood and enable us to get better at giving life and love away not only to make a difference in the lives of others but also to pump new life and gratitude into our own weary days.

We are thankful that Jesus took children into his arms, blessed them and welcomed them, and in so doing reminded us that if we want to welcome God into our lives then there is no one whom we can safely ignore. In the topsy-turvy kingdom of God, the most unlikely people are most likely to be agents of God and that when we reach out and love and care for them we are in essence putting our arms around God and saying hello to a whole new life.

We ask that your presence would be a guide to our loved ones who are sick, grieving, heartbroken, hurt, depressed, and struggling with life-changing issues. During these times of tumult and distress, it is very difficult to see clearly or to know how to pray. Help us to pray for them and with them and to find creative ways to be God's heart and hands to them so that we are all made more whole by life's difficulties and tragedies.

In the name of our Lord Jesus who showed us how to live and how to love, we pray, OUR FATHER, WHO ART IN HEAVEN,

Amen.

OFFERTORY PRAYER

We pray on this day for the courage and inspiration we need to give more of our time, energies, talents, money, and resources to the spiritual reality of life that we can neither see nor grasp for very long but which nurtures and challenges us over the long-haul of our lives. As we find ways to be more involved in your holy purposes in our midst, we pray our lives might be a reflection of the love that has claimed us and the grace that continues to sustain us. In the name of the One who is our way, our truth, and our life, we pray, AMEN.