

“The Greatest Love”

Mark 9: 33 – 37

Makemie Memorial Presbyterian Church

February 14, 2010

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<sup>33</sup>Then they came to Capernaum; and when Jesus was in the house he asked them, “What were you arguing about on the way?”

<sup>34</sup>But they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another who was the greatest. <sup>35</sup>Jesus sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, “Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.”

<sup>36</sup>Then he took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms, he said to them, <sup>37</sup>“Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.”

This ends the reading.

I'm glad to be here; after two Sundays of no church, due to snow & more snow. Yes, the family had devotions & scripture reading. I even tried to sing a hymn but, was begged to stop. It was nice to have service at home with one another, but it felt as though something wasn't quite right. This experience of home church brought these nebulous thoughts into focus for me. And more & more I'm convinced that we miss something vital to our faith when we insist on approaching God one by one. Our individual relationships with God are very important, but they don't make us the body of Christ. It's our life together that makes us Christ's body, a mysterious organism that is much more than a collection of individuals. When we come together to worship, we form a new being with a name & an address, which has its own life & reputation. We call it the church -- not the building but the people -- a phenomenon that has been around longer than any of us. When you or I identify ourselves as members of the church, we get credit for things we didn't do.

We may also get blame for things we didn't do, but the point is, the church is more than its individual members. We have a community identity & a community mandate. We stand for something, which it behooves us to recall from time to time.

Do we, as a body, resemble Christ or have we taken on the characteristics of someone else? Are we true to our head or are we giving him a headache by yanking away & refusing to belong to him? By squabbling like a bunch of teenagers over which of us is the most important so we become unable to recognize anyone outside of our own venue. Like a homeless person, a jobless person, a neighbor, an earthquake survivor in Haiti, an Aunt, an Uncle, a grandparent, or even a child.

Jesus had a thing about children. While other people tended to ignore anyone shorter than their own kneecap, Jesus saw what was going on down there. He saw the toddlers hanging onto their mother's skirts & shrinking away from the stray dogs, the wagon wheels, the donkey dung that no one up top seemed aware of. He saw them trying to keep up with the grown-ups when they walked – gamely at first & then quickly defeated, limping along with one arm pulled half out of its socket by tall people with giant strides. He saw how the adults coo-cooed to them when there was nothing else going on but quickly losing interest in them the moment another adult appeared.

Children were fillers, not main events. They were gifts of God who would be useful someday – to look after their parents, to hold down responsible jobs, then have children of their own – but meanwhile they

were non-entities—fuzzy caterpillars to be fed & sheltered until they could turn into butterflies.

Jesus seemed to like them just the way they were, which was unusual for a man & especially a bachelor. Although he had none of his own, Jesus was not afraid of babies. He took them in his arms & blessed them. He knew how to put his hand behind their wobbly heads, how to pass them back to their mothers without dropping them. Even the two-year-olds didn't bother him. He never asked the parents please to take them to the nursery. On the contrary, when his disciples scolded people for bringing their children to church, Jesus was indignant. The kingdom belongs to such as these, he said. They are full-fledged citizens of God's realm – not later, but right now.

This partiality may not sound as strange now as it did back then, because we are much more tuned into children than first-century Palestinians ever were. Far from ignoring children, middle-class Americans tend to idealize them, dressing them in Ralph Lauren fashions, putting them in first-grade French classes & setting a place for them at adult dinner parties. Maybe we lavish the attention on them we wish someone had lavished on us, but in any case children are much more visible (& audible) in the adult world than they have ever been before.

Maybe you've read the article in the paper about Lisa Brown, the attorney who brought her five-month-old daughter to a deposition & drove her opposing council crazy. He retaliated by filing a motion to "exclude gurgling infant" from future depositions.

"The child's presence is a distraction & unprofessional," his motion states, "precisely because the baby behaves normally for a baby."

He lost, but his objection lets me know that there are limits to our tolerance of children. Yes, they are innocent, playful, vulnerable, honest, fresh-faced & loving, especially if you are only around them for about fifteen minutes a day. But if you spend more time with them than that, then you know that children are also noisy, clinging, destructive, self-centered & surprisingly cruel. The best of them will pluck the whiskers right off a cat if you don't keep an eye on them, or knock other children down for trying to play with their toys. "I love children," wrote Nancy Mitford, "especially when they cry, for then someone will take them away."

So I don't think Jesus was holding them up as moral examples when he took children in his arms & blessed them. He didn't say we should imitate them, after all. He just said that when we welcome them in his name

we welcome him, & that when we welcome him we welcome God. That's a pretty amazing equation, if you think about it.

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 & laugh at her dumb jokes & never mind that you have more important things to do, like finishing the laundry or earning a living. She isn't filler. She's 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 & run to hug your knees, but you can't list her as a job reference or ask her to lend you a hundred dollars to get your car fixed. She isn't good for anything like that. She isn't in charge of anything, she can't buy you anything, she will not even remember your birthday or invite you over for supper with some friends. She has no status, no influence, no income, which makes her great in God's eyes. She's just what we need.

And us, well, we understand, don't we, that we're able to work on our own greatness by understanding that it is what we do when we think no one is looking with someone who doesn't count, for no reward, that ushers us into the presence of God, no greater love.

Do you see what Jesus is up to here? It's one more of his lessons in the topsy-turvy kingdom of God, where the first shall be last & the last shall be first & everyone who thinks he or she is on the top of the heap is in for a big surprise. Jesus is not just talking about children either. He's talking about all the little ones in this world with no status, no influence, no income. He's daring us to welcome them as bearers of God, to believe that God's hierarchy is the reverse of ours & that greatness is only available to those with no ambition to be great.

The whole lesson came about because he caught the disciples playing "Who's Greatest" on the road to Capernaum. If you were ever caught passing a note in elementary school, then you know how they felt. "What were you arguing about on the way?" he asked them & no one said a word, because they had been fighting about who was the best, the most faithful, the most-likely-to-succeed disciple. Peter, James & John were the favorites—the first three disciples Jesus called—who still got to go places with him that the others didn't. Among them, Peter figured he had it all sewed up because he was the first to call Jesus the Messiah, but the others reminded him that he was also the one whom Jesus called Satan, for refusing to accept Jesus' forecast of his own death.

That was the heart of the problem, really. They were arguing about who was greatest because they couldn't stand what Jesus had said about being killed. They didn't understand & they were afraid to ask, so they got as far away from it as they could by playing status games instead. Who is first, who is best, who is greatest. We know what that's like. When we're scared of something; don't ask. Act like nothing is wrong. Change the subject & talk about something else instead, something that makes you feel big & strong. That's what the disciples were doing, which was why Jesus had to sit them down & give them a leadership seminar right then & there. "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all & servant of all," he told them. Then he showed them what he meant by taking a little child in his arms. They wanted to know who was greatest, so he showed them: twenty-six inches tall, limited vocabulary, unemployed, zero net worth, nobody. God's agent. The last, the least of all.

Our hierarchies are so subtle that half the time we aren't even aware of them. One Sunday I was standing outside on the patio of the church I served in St. Petersburg. It was right after the 11 o'clock service when a man with a sobbing child on his shoulder came out right behind his wife, who held a beaming child by the hand. "What's the matter?" I asked her & she explained. Their eldest son – the beaming one—had just entered third

grade & was going to be an acolyte. Inside the deacon had been showing him the ropes – how to light the candles, how to carry the torch—when his little brother had announced with stars in his eyes that he would like to be an acolyte too. For the umpteenth time in his short life, he was told no, that he was too young, too small, that he would have to wait & well, it simply undid him. He was never first, his mother explained. He was always last & I thought, “God help us, we’re doing it right here—making sure the first go first & the last stay last.

I don’t know what the answer is. I don’t know how you operate a church or a business or a society by turning it over to those with the least to offer, but I do know that God’s values are not our values & that knowledge alone might be enough to keep us humble. However we choose to organize our lives, we have this little child to remind us that God organizes things otherwise & that if we want to welcome God into our lives -- then there is no one whom we may 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, the ones who are sobbing on someone’s shoulder because they are always, always last.

In God's world things are different. Gurgling babies derail taped depositions. Children run the United Nations. Toddlers are Presbytery Execs & second sons get to go first, while servants sit down at table they used to polish & the greatest disciple is the one who waits on them, the one whose name you can never remember (was that Thaddeus?).

If we want to enter this kingdom, there is a way: go find a nobody to put your arms around & say hello to God.