

Sermons at
First Lutheran Church (ELCA)
Reggie Denton, Pastor

September 19, 2021 (Proper 20, Year B)
Mark 9:30-37

When I read this story in the Gospel of Mark, I'm reminded of what it was like when I was in ELEMENTARY school, a long, long time ago. My whole class was a bunch of goofballs. It was a wonder our teachers were able to teach us anything at all.

But I guess we were pretty typical. When the teacher turned her back, we'd start passing notes and whispering. When the teacher CAUGHT somebody, she made them stand up and READ the note in front of the whole class. The guilty parties were mortified, but the rest of us just laughed. It seemed that, once the TEACHER got hold of it, that stuff wasn't so IMPORTANT anymore. It was just silly and ridiculous.

That's what the disciples are like in our gospel reading today. Jesus is teaching them, and he couldn't GET any CLEARER. "The Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him, and three days after being killed, he will rise again."

There it was. Plain and simple. The whole plan, betrayal, crucifixion and resurrection. But the disciples JUST DON'T UNDERSTAND. The best they could muster up was a blank stare and a confused silence.

Actually, it's more like they didn't WANT to understand. They SHOULD have been curious. They should have seen the significance. They should have had some questions. After all, this wasn't the kind of thing you hear everyday. But they were AFRAID to.

And who can blame them? All this talk of suffering and death wasn't at ALL what they had in MIND for Jesus, and for THEMSELVES. They'd envisioned a glorious future: a new Davidic dynasty, a magnificent new kingdom with them on top. So, NO WONDER they didn't understand.

And no WONDER, when Jesus turns his back, they start to whisper. And again, I imagine it sounded like CHILDREN, something like,

"Psst. Who do you think is the BEST disciple?"

And Peter says, "Well, Andrew and I were the FIRST disciples that Jesus called."

And Andrew adds, "Yeah, and Peter went with Jesus up on the mountain for the transfiguration too."

But John counters, "So what, so did me and James, and we were called on the same day YOU two were."

And James ups the anti and says, "Hey, and don't forget that Jesus keeps calling John the BELOVED disciple."

And then the rest of the disciples say, "Ooh."

And Peter finally yells, "Well, I'm the ROCK, so there!"

Well, HOWEVER the argument went, Jesus catches them. And like my old TEACHERS USED to do, he calls them on it: "Why don't you share with the whole GROUP what's so important." But the disciples didn't answer. As SLOW as they were, even THEY knew that Jesus wouldn't APPROVE of what they were arguing about. When the TEACHER asks, SOME things don't seem as IMPORTANT anymore.

I once received this in an e-mail. You might have heard it before.

God won't ask what kind of car you drove; He'll ask how many people you DROVE who DIDN'T have a car.

God won't ask the square footage of your house; He'll ask how many people you WELCOMED INTO your home.

God won't ask about the clothes you had in your closet; He'll ask how many you helped to clothe.

God won't ask about your social status; He'll ask what kind of CLASS you displayed.

God won't ask how many material possessions you had; He'll ask if they DICTATED your LIFE.

God won't ask how high your salary was; He'll ask if you compromised your CHARACTER to obtain it.

God won't ask how many promotions you received; He'll ask how you promoted others.

God won't ask what your job TITLE was; He'll ask if you PERFORMED your job to the best of your ability.

God won't ask what you did to help yourself; He'll ask what you did to help others.

God won't ask how many friends you had; He'll ask how many people to WHOM you were a friend.

God won't ask in what NEIGHBORHOOD you lived; He'll ask how you TREATED your NEIGHBORS.

God won't ask about the color of your skin; He'll ask about the content of your character.

God won't ask how many times your deeds matched your words; He'll ask how many times they DIDN'T.

As it turns out, the disciples were a lot like us. We ALL want to know who's the greatest. We want to know who's the best at our work, in our community, in our school, even in our church. This is a world of wealth and status, and we wonder who's going to end up on top.

But what if JESUS were to ask US, what all the FUSS was about? We'd probably be silent, just like the disciples were. In the eyes of the TEACHER, SOME things don't seem as IMPORTANT anymore.

We ALL have a desire within us to be GREAT. But I'm struck by the fact that Jesus doesn't tell us not to feel that way. Jesus was HUMAN and he KNEW that desire is simply human nature. So instead of criticizing us, Jesus challenges us to reconsider what GREATNESS IS, what greatness LOOKS like.

So, Jesus takes a little CHILD in his arms to SHOW us. He says, "Whoever WELCOMES one such CHILD in my name welcomes ME."

Now this was controversial stuff. Remember, the DISCIPLES' world was a MAN'S world, EXTREMELY sexist and patriarchal. A child? Welcome and accept a child? Children were as tall as their kneecaps, limited in vocabulary, unemployed, and had zero net worth. A child was a NOBODY in their world. They were NON-people. They were helpless and needy. Men ignored them and treated them like property.

So, the disciples didn't even NOTICE that that little child was in the ROOM. But JESUS DID notice her, and picked her up and held her in his arms, and said, "Whoever welcomes a child IN MY NAME welcomes me."

And with those words, Jesus made CHILDREN a sign of how GOD ranks people.

And have you noticed how CHILDREN rank people? I have a white friend whose adopted sister is African-american. They both have six-year-old daughters. One day this summer their little daughters were out playing in the sun together, and when they came in, the little black girl and the little white girl started comparing their suntans. They didn't know that they were different. And more IMPORTANTLY, they didn't CARE.

You probably saw this recently:

Watch video "Child gets hair cut just like best friend so teacher can't tell them apart."

That's what the kingdom of God looks like. It changes everything. It means that there's NO MORE DIVISIONS. Even CHILDREN can be disciples. ALL people are welcome. And everybody ELSE that doesn't have any status—the poor, the sick, the elderly—they're ALSO treated with dignity and LOVE. This is what GOD'S kingdom LOOKS like.

There's a story you may have heard of a small church in a college town. It was Sunday morning and the service had already started. Right before the pastor was going to start the sermon, a young college student walked in. Now he was one of those wild-looking types: He had crazy hair and was wearing jeans with holes in them and a T-shirt and sandals. He looked COMPLETELY out of place in THAT church, but he started walking down the aisle looking for a seat. It made the people uncomfortable. "What was HE doing here? Why did he have to disrupt their worship?"

Then the young man did something UNTHINKABLE—he sat right in front. And I don't mean in the front pew. He sat where he was most comfortable, right on the carpet, right in front. (Now while that was perfectly acceptable at a college prayer meeting and stuff like that, I can ASSURE you that had never happened in that CHURCH before!) Everybody just stared. The tension in the air was thick.

Then the pastor noticed that, from way in the back of the church, an usher was slowly making his way toward the young man. The usher was an older gentleman, in his 80's, and had silver-gray hair, and a three-piece suit. He was a godly man, very elegant, very dignified. He walked with a cane, and as he moved toward the boy, everyone was saying to themselves that you can't BLAME him for what he was about to do. How could you expect a man of his age and background to understand some college kid on the floor?

It took a long time for the man to reach the front. The church was utterly silent, except for the clicking of the old man's cane. The minister couldn't even start the sermon until the usher did what he had to do.

Finally, the elderly man dropped his cane, and, with great difficulty, he sat down NEXT to the college student on the floor and said, "Do you mind if I worship WITH you?"

THAT'S what welcoming a child MEANS: welcoming the LEAST of us. That's the KIND of thing we DO in the kingdom of God. We help people. We love people, even when SOME might think they don't deserve it. We love them because GOD loves them, because they're CHILDREN of God, and that's ALL that matters. Jesus calls us to SEEK OUT the people that WE would RATHER ignore, to LOVE them in his name. In HIS name. Because he died for them. He died for all of us.

Let's not forget our teacher's FIRST lesson in this reading. "The Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him, and three days after being killed, he will rise again." Jesus didn't just SAY that; he LIVED it, and died FOR it. The first DID become last. Jesus Christ, God's only Son, the GREATEST OF ALL, became last – for us.

You see, WE were the children, we were the HELPLESS ones, we were the HOPELESS ones, and Jesus welcomed US. He died for us, to make US, who were LAST of all, and LEAST of all, the FIRST in his kingdom.

When the TEACHER asks, SOME things don't seem as IMPORTANT anymore. The TEACHER knows what's REALLY important: "Whoever wants to be first must be LAST of all and SERVANT of all."

Welcome your brothers and sisters as GOD has welcomed YOU. Welcome them as a child, as a FELLOW child of GOD. Amen.