

“Held in His Arms”

Valley Presbyterian Church – September 20, 2009

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Philippians 2:14-18

Mark 9:33-37

Throughout my childhood, it often seemed to my parents as if my two brothers and I had yet another sibling. This mysterious fourth child was likely to be conjured whenever there were muddy footprints on the kitchen floor, or when a bouncing ball resulted in a broken household item, or when milk was left out on the counter to spoil. “Who did this?” my brothers and I would be asked; to which we would respond “I dunno.” Sometimes that was true – that one of two of us actually did not know who was responsible – but just as often, as perpetrators of these various offenses, we didn’t have the guts to fess up. And so, a fourth child was born. It got to the point where my parents sometimes wouldn’t even ask, instead saying: “let me guess, I dunno did it.”

When Jesus and his disciples reach the city of Capernaum, Jesus asks them a question. He wants to know what they were arguing about while they had been walking along the road. Not surprisingly, they are reluctant to say, for their conversation had not been in keeping with what Jesus had been and would again teach them: that greatness comes in service; that in God’s kingdom, the first shall be last and the last shall be elevated to first.

“In the context of this teaching about a child (in their midst), it is easy to imagine that the response of silence from the disciples is not unlike that children who fail to respond when asked a question that begs a self-incriminating response...The disciples hold their tongues out of clearly implied shame.”¹ They do not, or maybe cannot, yet fully understand the lessons that Jesus has been teaching them about self-sacrifice, because they are participants in a world that hands rewards to those who come in first; those who seize the mantle of greatness. But, in the eyes of God, true greatness rests in being a servant to others, especially those considered to be the least. Here, Mark uses the word for servant that the church has adopted to describe the office of its greatest servants – diakonos – deacons, whose calling is to serve those who have the greatest needs.

Jesus takes the initiative to provide his disciples with an object lesson about humility that will broaden their understanding, and open up the communication that has been stifled by the disciples’ unwillingness to admit their personal desires to become great. The content of the teaching is once again about service and humility, but the vehicle for its expression is welcoming children; being a servant of those who are small, silent or forgotten.

¹ Grant Holbrook, “Gleanings from the Text,” Sept. 20, 2009

In the ancient world, both children and servants lived on the receiving end of things: no possessions, no power of being able to give, no net worth. Children were not outcasts – they were loved by their parents as we love our children today – but until they reached an age when they could contribute to the family, they were, in the public realm, non-persons. They were like fuzzy caterpillars who crawled around and took up space until it was time to become a butterfly.

Jesus tells his disciples that: *whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.* (v. 35) “Notice that he does not say servant to all, but servant of all, which suggests that the disciples are called to be servant leaders regardless of what other people seek to be. Servant leaders practice greatness by being givers who serve together through shared responsibility.”² It is an invitation to imagine the kind of leadership that cares about the ongoing formation of a community of disciples, which includes the next generation of leaders. In other words, kids do matter. It involves things like creating a safe space to ask questions about God; it encourages the exploration of Christian vocation; it models what greatness really looks like in Jesus’ image, and it welcomes the voices of young people in the community and outsiders who are welcomed into the community.

At that house in Capernaum, Jesus places a child in the center of their little community – welcoming the child, wrapping his arms around the child – and tells the disciples that when they provide welcome in this way, they also welcome him and the one who sent him. To do what Jesus did will often mean setting down or letting go of something else so that our hands and hearts are free to wrap around the child. To place the child at the center will often mean that something else is moved to the side. Welcoming will often mean that we simultaneously release something else; whether it is our pride, or our desire for greatness, or our shame about not understanding, or our fear about not being in control. Welcoming and releasing are intricately related, for it is through giving in a self-sacrificial way that we let go of our expectations of gaining something back in return. Jesus asks us to serve without attachment to the outcomes.³

Most of us can’t help but to love children, and can hardly imagine a community of Jesus’ followers who would not welcome them with open arms. We love them for their energy, their innocence, their honesty and their sense of wonder. And yet, we also know the ways that they challenge us: in our families, in the community, and in the church. How can we know what they want or need when they don’t know, or can’t tell us? How can we hold their fleeting attention? How can we both provide for them and also care for them – is it better to work at home with them there or to enroll them in day care? Should we tell them yes when they are eager to try yet another sport or instrument, or make them stick with the one they have already started? Do we give them the keys and let them drive even when they really aren’t very good at it? Is it alright if they choose a major that that limits their job prospects after graduation?

² Stephen Lewis, “Insignificant Greatness”

³ Glenn Mitchell in *Christian Century*, Sept. 8, 2009

Jesus picked up the little child and held him or her in his arms and said to the disciples that when you welcome one of these children, you welcome me, and the one who sent me. We know that in welcoming a child, we are also letting go. We are letting go of control: trusting that in God's economy, it is not about who achieves the most, or who gets noticed the most, or who acquires the most, or who the world admires the most. In God's eyes, the first shall be last and whoever wants to be first must be a servant of all.

Barbara Brown Taylor suggests that "we work on our own greatness by understanding that it is what we do when we think no one is looking, with someone who does not count, for no reward, that ushers us into the presence of God."⁴ This will mean that much of our lives and our days cannot be measured by worldly standards such as efficiency or effectiveness. Instead, we are instructed to welcome others and to be servants of all.

Still, the message of Jesus' lesson for his disciples is not complete without its visual aid: a little child being held in the arms of the messiah. Following their conversation on the road concerning who was the greatest, they had suddenly been struck silent by Jesus' question: *what were you arguing about on the way?* (v. 33) The best response that the disciples can muster is to sheepishly shrug their shoulders and point a finger at the imaginary thirteenth disciple, the one named "I dunno." Their grandiose visions of self-importance have swiftly been dashed by the realization that Jesus knows their every word and thought and deed.

But, we can imagine that just when the disciples are feeling timid and vulnerable and small, they look up and see the child in Jesus' arms, and they realize that those same arms are open to them as well. They are not being judged and condemned for their juvenile bickering about who among them is the greatest; instead God in Christ wants to forgive them, to teach them, and to help them grow. Jesus wants them to understand what Paul will later write in his letter to the Romans: that nothing – nothing we think or do or say – nothing can separate us from the love that we have in Jesus Christ.

And so, Jesus challenges us to look for the ways that we can become servants of all, to welcome others with open arms; but he also reminds us that no matter the challenges that life brings to us, no matter how much life can humble us and make us feel as small and vulnerable as a little child, we are being held in Christ's loving arms. We can be secure in the knowledge that God loves us, and protects us, and guides us, and provides for us, and is revealed to us in the faces of one another. Thanks be to God. AMEN.

⁴ Barbara Brown Taylor, *An Altar in the World: A Spiritual Geography*