

“Servant, Singer and Sage of All”
B, Pentecost 18; Mark 9:30-37
September 23, 2018; 10:00 am
Congregational UCC, Buena Vista, CO
Rev. Rebecca K. Poos

Mark 9:30-37 The Message (MSG)

³⁰⁻³² Leaving there, they went through Galilee. He didn't want anyone to know their whereabouts, for he wanted to teach his disciples. He told them, "The Son of Man is about to be betrayed to some people who want nothing to do with God. They will murder him. Three days after his murder, he will rise, alive." They didn't know what he was talking about, but were afraid to ask him about it.

So You Want First Place?

³³ They came to Capernaum. When he was safe at home, he asked them, "What were you discussing on the road?"

³⁴ The silence was deafening—they had been arguing with one another over who among them was greatest.

³⁵ He sat down and summoned the Twelve. "So you want first place? Then take the last place. Be the servant of all."

³⁶⁻³⁷ He put a child in the middle of the room. Then, cradling the little one in his arms, he said, "Whoever embraces one of these children as I do embraces me, and far more than me—God who sent me."

I. THE FIRST LAST AND THE LAST FIRST

But Jesus! You've got it all mixed up! What do you mean, the losers are really the winners and the winners need to be doing the menial tasks?! Mopping up the locker room after the game; taking out the trash, cooking the meals for the homeless?

What do you mean we need to revert to childlikeness? Isn't that what we spend our whole lives trying to grow out of? You don't quite mean *that*, right? There's some hidden message here—maybe the translators got your words a little mixed up.

Sometimes, Jesus, it just seems like you've got things backwards. Upside down. Here! Have another cup of coffee. You'll make more sense later in the day

a. The Heart of the Organization

Some years ago St. Paul School of Theology in Kansas City was seeking a new president. Over one hundred candidates applied for the position. The search committee narrowed the list to five eminently qualified persons.

Then somebody came up with a brilliant idea: let's send a person to the institutions where each of the five finalists is currently employed, and let's interview the janitor at each place, asking him what he thinks of the man seeking to be our president. This was done and a janitor gave such a

glowing appraisal of William MacElvaney that he was selected President of St. Paul's School of Theology.

Somebody on that search committee understood, in a flash of genius, that those who live close to Christ become so secure in his love that they no longer relate to other people according to rank or power or money or prestige. They treat janitors and governors with equal dignity. They regard everybody as a VIP. Children seem to do this intuitively; adult Christians have to relearn it.

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B. Carrying Makes Us Stronger

There was a tribe of Indians who lived a long time ago in the state of Mississippi. They lived next to a very swift and dangerous river. The current was so strong that if somebody happened to fall in or stumbled into it they could be swept

away downstream.

One day the tribe was attacked by a hostile group of settlers. They found themselves with their backs against the river. They were greatly outnumbered and their only chance for escape was to cross the rushing river. They huddled together and those who were strong picked up the weak and put them on their shoulders; the little children, the sick, the old and the infirm, those who were ill or wounded were carried on the backs of those who were strongest.

They waded out into the river, and to their surprise they discovered that the weight on their shoulders carrying the least and the lowest helped them to keep their footing and to make it safely across the river.

Jesus is trying to teach the disciples an object lesson about greatness, about servanthood, about leadership. He is saying to them and to us, "Have you lost the childlike joy and love and faith that once were yours?" He is also saying to them and to us, "If you want to walk on secure ground in this world it helps to carry someone with you."

(King Duncan, Collected Sermons)

II. IT'S NOT WHAT YOU THINK

Kate Matthews encourages us not to "sentimentalize" this scene too much. Jesus wasn't just doing a "Time with Children" in the front of the sanctuary and cuddling up to them, hoping the adults would tune in for a moment and realize this message was as much for them as for the kids—a necessary interruption

before getting on with “the rest of the service and sermon.”

Jesus has had his coffee and he’s ready to rock their world a bit. He’s not impressed with what he caught snippets of on the road earlier, and their constant cluelessness about what he and the gospel message were about!

Kate Matthews reminds us to look deeper at this passage:

We know something important is coming when Jesus sits down, like a traditional Jewish teacher. This isn't just a casual conversation but something critical, something profound, that he hopes his followers will remember long after he has died and risen again.

Perhaps they suffer short-term memory loss when it comes to Jesus' words about suffering and dying. They would rather think about glory, but then, who wouldn't? This journey toward Jerusalem and the cross is a long one, and understanding does not come easily to these disciples.

We might easily sentimentalize this scene as Jesus picks up a small child and exhorts his followers to welcome "one such child" in his name as a way to welcome him. Isn't it a sweet scene, when Jesus tenderly cuddles a child and, we imagine, appeals to the soft hearts under the tough exterior of these big, rough men? It is indeed a sweet scene that we imagine, but that's not what's going on here.

Jesus is once again saying something perplexing, even disconcerting, and certainly provocative. Instead of a sweet, sentimental moment, the disciples are experiencing *one* more paradox, one more boat-rocking, one more radical up-ending of the way they think things ought to be, and hope they will be, when Jesus comes into their idea of glory. While they want to find their way to the top, to claim greatness, he's telling them to lay claim instead to the last and lowest place, to be the servant of all, to be first in caring for others.

What might that look like? It might look like consulting with the janitor on staff selections. Or working *with* the janitor on the most important work to be done. Or carrying one another across the difficult rivers of life and loss, to lead to a new place of being and acting in the world.

Vicki Kemper reminds us that Jesus also tells us that each soul is important, and being the servant of all means never losing sight of the importance of our one most important gift –the gift of ourselves to the circle.

Start With One

Written by **Vicki Kemper**

"If a shepherd has a hundred sheep, and one of them has gone astray, does he not leave the ninety-nine on the mountains and go in search of the one?" - Matthew 18:12

Jesus tells the Parable of the Lost Sheep to help us understand how precious we are to God: How the Good Shepherd cannot bear to lose

even one beloved one to predators, thieves, lousy judgment, a poor sense of direction, or plain bad luck. How, regardless of how many fat and happy sheep are safe in God's heart, she will not rest until every single dear one is accounted for. How heaven rejoices when the lost one is found.

The parable also speaks to the power of one: How we can save ourselves and change the world by loving each other to the ends of the earth, one person at a time. To mere sheep like us, this approach might seem inefficient. But this is the way of love and hope, relationship and wisdom, and blessed are those who follow it.

When we focus on the magnitude of suffering and need in the world, we are easily overwhelmed. We are tempted to conclude that there is nothing we can do.

But we can start with one—one person, one problem, one need. I know it sounds slow and hard. But here's something I've learned from our church's provision of sanctuary for a Guatemalan man facing deportation:

When we give of ourselves to serve even one, powerful new communities of love are created. Walls of division and unknowing crumble and fall. What was unimaginable becomes routine. Duty becomes a joy. Our sense of "church" explodes. The "system" is not changed right away, but we are transformed.

Consider this: Members of 10 churches, one synagogue, and a Quaker meeting provide meals for Lucio Perez. Some 200 people have accompanied him through every hour of every day for almost 11

months. More than 80 drivers bring his wife and children for visits. Hundreds of people have contributed financial support.

All this for one man and his one family. And all of heaven rejoices.

Prayer

Good Shepherd, may I have your heart for the one. And when I am the one, may I let your love find me.

Karl Barth, probably the most important theologians of the twentieth century famously said, when asked in 1962 (on his one visit to America) how he would summarize the essence of the millions of words he had published, he replied, "Jesus loves me this I know, for the Bible tells me so."

The gift of one. The servant of all. Getting down to a new level of understanding that the lofty heights and high-level power and prestige are not "where it's at" with Jesus and the way that he would lead us into life and through our lives.

Warren Montgomery, Mary & Les, Messamer, Marge Dorfmeister, Charlotte Smith, Liz Anderson, Marcille Drake, Norma and Bob Smith, VirJeanne Williams,*all* our wise servants and sages that we celebrate in this place and in the wider community – here among us and across the veil – they've figured it out! And they have much to teach us, like Jesus taking a child into his arms.

When it's all been said and done. When all the years of faithful service and commitment and learning about faith meeting life – "Jesus loves me, this I

know, for the bible tells me so.” The best things in life are those shared with your friends and family and church family.

Amen.

We celebrate *all* of you on this day, in this year, and for many years to come – we hope!

Warren, you’re a wonderful example to us of exactly what Jesus said, and we celebrate your gifts among us – in the back row, in the front row, leading and following, smiling, singing and sharing life and love. Thank you for teaching us the Way of Jesus through song, sagacity and yes, even a little stalwart stubbornness!

WARREN’S VERSE (written by Janet Steiner)

He can sing a song
and use a voice so sweet
Tenor is his range
his sound is hard to beat
He can find a note
that adds such harmony
But still climbs the roof
to clean the chimney
He can find the time
to share a joke or two
When the vultures come
the music gets him through
When you put his age
into the family grid
He'll always be
just a kid