

## **Preaching for Lutheran Church of the Good Shepherd Pastor Scott Trevithick**

Date: September 19, 2021, Yr. B, 17<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost

Text: Mark 9:30-37

Title: Stories of Greatness

Focus: By setting before the disciples a child and calling them to extend service or hospitality to those who were the least-regarded (children in that culture had low status), Jesus redefined greatness in a way that was counter-cultural to his first-century time as well as our own in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Function: Jesus' example from the gospel text redefined greatness as how we care for those who are powerless, overlooked, or without status. The sermon will likewise offer examples of self-giving, loving, counter-cultural service.

### **Mark 9:30-37**

<sup>30</sup>They [Jesus and the disciples] went on from there and passed through Galilee. He did not want anyone to know it; <sup>31</sup>for he was teaching his disciples, saying to them, "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." <sup>32</sup>But they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him.

<sup>33</sup>Then they came to Capernaum; and when he 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>He 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."

### **Peter Didn't "Get It" (A brief review of last week's text and sermon from Mark 8)**

In the gospel text from Mark last week and as we talked about in the sermon, Jesus asked the disciples, "Who do people say that I am?" They responded and then Jesus directed the question to the disciples, "Who do *you* say that I am?" Peter answers, "the Messiah." That sounds right to us, but when Jesus goes on to explain that his path as Messiah will include suffering, rejection, and death, we quickly see that Peter's idea of Messiah doesn't match Jesus' idea. Peter rebukes Jesus because this just doesn't make sense to him; it's wrong. Jesus in turn rebukes Peter. In the conversation that follows, we see Jesus teaching not just Peter and the disciples, but those in the surrounding crowd. He redefines not just what it means to be Messiah, but what it means to follow him.

## The Pattern of Prediction, Confusion, and Redefinition

So, Peter didn't "get it." This way of suffering and rejection and death didn't make sense to him. And so, in the text from last week, gospel writer Mark as storyteller shows this three-part pattern:

1. Jesus describing the suffering and death he will undergo
2. Peter doesn't "get it" and then
3. Jesus uses the occasion to redefine some key aspect of who he is and what it means to follow him.

As with last week's story in chapter 8, the same pattern exists in today's reading from chapter 9:

- Jesus predicts his upcoming betrayal and death
  - [He was] teaching his disciples, saying to them, "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" (Mark 9:31)
- The disciples are confused and "get stuck" or become immobilized or then disengage.
  - "But they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask" (9:32).
  - They are so confused or so clueless, that they were bickering among themselves about who was the greatest among them. They were jockeying for position or were fussing about their pecking order.
    - When Jesus asked them what they were talking about (I'm guessing he knew, but wanted them to say,) narrator Mark says, "they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another who was the greatest" (9:34).
- Jesus redirects them or redefines a core characteristic about what it means to be a disciple. The next step in this three-part pattern is that Jesus redefines some key aspect of what it means to follow him.

Jesus did this in two ways: a brief saying (A wisdom saying called an *aphorism*) and an example:

- "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all" (9:35).
- <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."

## What's Jesus' Point?

The disciples were once again not getting the message. Jesus is redefining what it means to be Messiah and to follow him. Jesus is saying he's ready to undergo suffering and rejection and death and that love would (or should) propel his disciples

and followers to similar acts of self-giving service. They're not only not getting that, they are *doing* the opposite, bickering with each other about who is the greatest.

## The Teaching Continues. . .

So Jesus, ever the teacher, wants to be as plain and clear as possible: After this brief saying (with no additional explanation), he gives them a concrete example.

- He puts a child in the midst of them
- What do you think that means? Again, like a skilled teacher, Jesus is *showing* rather than explaining.

## Children in First Century Culture

While the text doesn't explain, here are some characteristics of children in that setting in the first century:

- Low status
- Without assets, property
- Without legal protection
- Dependent

Remember that the disciples were squabbling over who was the greatest among them? That tendency is like another social pattern described in the gospels as well as New Testament letters about people looking for seats of honor among dinner guests. Those status-seeking behaviors can't be all that different from our own habits. We do it in different ways, but I'm sure there are times when our motivation comes more from wanting to be seen by others or the possibility of receiving a reward than it does by straight-forward acts of compassion.

Jesus sets a child before them and doesn't elaborate, except to say to welcome a child is like welcoming Jesus himself and God who sent him. The child is an example.

- I think the message, for disciples who are slow to "get it," is that greatness is not about jockeying for social status or self-elevation.
- It's about caring for or engaging in acts of service on behalf of those who can do nothing for you in return. If a child is without assets or recognized status, then they have no ability to confer honor or status or other tangible benefit to you. In the social calculus of Jesus' day (and, perhaps just as surely, in our own time), if you did something nice for a rich person, then they could do something nice for you in return. Your act might be motivated by self-interest.
- Jesus is redefining what it means to be great. By his example, I think Jesus is saying that greatness is about serving someone else or about doing something for another without expectation of something in return. "Greatness" is in acts of self-giving kindness toward someone who likely cannot do something for you in return.

To borrow the words I used last week to try to describe the difference between how Peter was seeing or defining things and the “divine ways” Jesus was talking about, this way of God’s seems “topsy-turvy, backwards, or upside down.”

- **In both last week’s and this week’s readings, Jesus presents the radical idea that is counter-cultural in Jesus’ time as well as our own, that greatness is characterized by service or recognition of vulnerability and how we pay attention to or care for those who are most overlooked.**

## Stories of “Greatness”

Following the pattern of the text of Jesus simply providing an example, I’d like to retell stories from our own setting of acts of service or kindness that are offered with no expectation of anything in return.

These stories have come from my own observations or people have shared them with me or pointed them out to me. Just to be clear, I have sought out the stories and asked others to share them with me. To retain the focus on the acts of service themselves, I’m going to tell them without attributing them to any one person.

- **Caregivers:** “I thought of those who care for their kids, spouse, parents with health and or mental issues. That is so very hard and they often don’t even receive a break from the tasks, much less thanks, or even understanding of what they are going through. not all family members can or will do that.
- [Other] people often focus on the person who is ill rather than their caregiver.”

## Another person remembered. . .

- Those who are professional caregivers or health care professionals in the community.
- Teachers
- Those who care for others who are elderly or affected by dementia , and especially for those who are not even family members.

Another described the compassion for youth served through Eddy House and our partnership through preparing Monday dinner each week. She identifies with the challenge many of them face with unsettled family relationships because of what she experienced in her own life during her teen years.

**Feeding Ministry:** Another church member was a part of a volunteer team who was serving meals in a shelter for those who were homeless. He began serving before COVID restrictions began. . .

I had been serving at [this mission] for quite a few years. They provide emergency housing and 3 meals a day. I helped prep and serve lunch each Monday. So, in April of 2020, when Covid was really getting started and pretty much everything was shut down, there were still 200 hungry and homeless guys that needed to be fed every day. Most days [the ministry] used around 12 - 15

volunteers for lunch. However, during this initial Covid scare, most volunteers quit out of concern for their health. I, too, was very close to just not showing up for my shift since everything relating to Covid was an unknown at the time. But I decided to keep going. Again, there were hungry mouths to feed, and I felt called to just show up and do my part. On 2 consecutive Mondays, there were only 2 volunteers there, instead of the 12-15. We managed and there was an abundance of "God bless you, brother" from the homeless guys as they came through the food line those days.

After about a month, [they] adapted their serving style due to Covid and no longer needed volunteers, but I was especially glad to help on those early Covid days.

## **Pet therapy support to children and youth**

There's a church member who was a Special Education teacher for the bulk of her career. She was accustomed to spending time with children who, as she says, "pretty much spend their lives in stressful situations."

From that background, in her retirement, she initiated other ways to reach out to children during stressful events. With her dog, who, as any pet-lover would know, paves the way for his ability to accept people as they are, she sits with children who are waiting a hearing in the Family Court in Reno. Lawyers and judges and guardians and parents are all discussing what should happen next. It's an anxious and unsettled time for children in that setting.

She has similarly visited with those at the Adolescent Treatment Center and the Northern Nevada Teen Challenge.

Upon her retirement as a special ed teacher, the classroom teacher asked her student to describe their memories of her and her dog: One boy relayed that when "[she] brought [her] puppy, he was able to hear her heart when he held her. "

## **Her "Reward"**

By Jesus' use of a child, one who cannot confer wealth or honor or status or return a favor, Jesus was redefining what it means to be great. He was presenting an example that was counter-cultural—that was not the usual way of thinking of things. Remember when Jesus said to Peter that he was thinking in human ways and not divine ways? (Mark 8). I described God's way as topsy-turvy upside down or backwards to our usual way of thinking. This person has discovered the joy and sense of purpose that comes from this kind of service. It's a different kind of reward. She wrote,

"I have always left feeling uplifted by those I interact with there. It is hard to explain what I receive from doing this—seems strange to say that I get joy and contentment out of it—but I do. I guess everyone you come in contact with has something to give you, if you are open to it."

May you yourself find examples of this kindness and self-giving service this week. Thanks be to God for those who extend such acts that are, following Jesus' example--ways of caring for those who are most vulnerable and acts of "greatness" in the topsy-turvy, backwards, and upside-down way that Jesus describes.