

Mark 9: 30 – 37

Sunday September 19, 2021

First regular Sunday back in the church building following the pandemic

God's Values

Prayer: God of wisdom and compassion, open to us your truth that we may bear good fruit and pursue peaceable goals. Keep us from jealousy and selfish ambition, from uncertainty and insincerity. May we serve your highest purposes...

God's values. At the beginning of this stewardship season at SC, I'd like to spend some time reflecting first on God's values, before we get into financial values. One of the things which years of study of the Bible reveals is that God's values can be very different from our values. Scripture reveals deep thinking about strength and vulnerability; pride and humility; authenticity and fraud. Jesus often uses the languages of economics to reveal value, but it is evident in other teachings, such as this scripture today.

I have been with you now about two and a half weeks, and as I begin this ministry with you, I have been thinking a lot about God's values and our immediate future. How things can get turned upside down to come out right. The pandemic has turned us all upside down, this congregation has just completed celebrations of Rev Allen's long and storied ministry, and now we begin a fall with so much in flux... the last 8:30 service I understand was offered here on March 8, 2020... who is South Church without Rev Allen's leadership, and the symbol of his leadership? What is our ministry in this continuing worldwide pandemic?

Two weeks ago after worship, I was handed a cup of coffee and I walked outside, the air was warm and clear, (no hurricane, no monsoonal rains, no blazing heat, just a beautiful late summer day) in this beautiful area near your memorial garden... after a year and a half of not drinking coffee at church, the simple normal...ordinary act, sipping a cup of coffee, chattering with you; I found myself lost in gratitude for the ordinary, blessing of gathering for worship and being near people casually, that I haven't made prearranged zoom arrangements with.

It's a gift. Ordinary enough -- but when you haven't been able to partake of such simple pleasures... a gift. I learned in the course of Pastoring in West Hartford that every family in our congregation had disappointments and setbacks, at different times and in different ways, due to the pandemic. We are all coming through a tough season. Which means it is a time to be especially thoughtful and gentle with one another.

You may have noticed that some people have been hit hard, some have found new ways to flourish, and some... are taking advantage of the situation...

In his day, just like our own, people took advantage of Jesus: you could get free food from him, be healed of your disease, you could use him to support your political ambitions.

Jesus was living an authentic life, doing new work in his day; there are people who will spin that for their own benefit. Always have been. In chapter 8 Jesus says: "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel will save it." Jesus offers us a way to begin a dialogue and to identify, or maybe we should say, *reveal* his followers.

I ask you from this pulpit (and it is a question for a pulpit): "Who do you say that Jesus is? And who will you therefore be?" Who are you to Jesus?

In Mark, after that exchange, there is an account of the transfiguration, then Jesus heals a boy who seems to have epileptic seizures, whom his disciples had not been able to heal. Jesus foretells his death and resurrection, and following that, on their way to Capernaum, the disciples discuss or argue – "We're not arguing, we're having a discussion" who is the greatest among them. And this is disappointing, indeed, coming after everything as it does: to be arguing about Who's Who in the kingdom of God when they haven't grasped the business model – that is, the way of the cross. "The path," as Henry Nouwen said, "the path of downward mobility." They should have known better...

Jesus sits them all down and says, "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all." Then he took a little child and put it among them: "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me, welcomes not me, but the one who sent me."

These verses in scripture are a great example of words which get used to serve a host of different agendas depending on whose lips they are on. Some take them to heart, some come to a new appreciation of them, and some spin them for their own purposes.

You may recognize that people have made this about abused children, parenting, family values, Christian education, public education, even abortion. To my eye, this isn't about abuse, education or politics, or even necessarily to do with children. Jesus is addressing his disciples about their discipleship. With a child in his arms, he speaks to his disciples: "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all." Jesus is turning the world upside down to make it come out right.

In the ancient world children's' role was to serve, that is, to learn by doing. That is how they learned their life skills, it's how they learned their future trades, children were apprenticed to a master in some trade. Jesus learned the carpentry trade, he learned it from Joseph. Today we call it, "helping," you want them to learn their life skills, like laundry, maybe how to iron a shirt, grass cutting and gardening, basic cooking and how to clean a room. (You'd get arrested if you said your children were your servants, but in the ancient world, you'd find the kids helping out and serving alongside everyone else who had to work for a living – which is most of us.) There's good evidence that Jesus himself grew up doing this; he uses parables about harvesting, baking bread, cleaning the house in search of a coin, and leaving property in the possession of a servant while the owner has left on a journey. He knows how things get done.

I expect, human nature being what it is, that children at the time of Jesus were similar to the children that you know. If you've ever tried to teach a child a life skill it often goes something like this: "It's time to set the table." "O great! I can do that..." and then the table is set incorrectly, you review how the forks and knives go, useless things are over-focused on like the all-important tractor trailer Lego centerpiece, or newly colored paper placemats for everyone. After a few evenings of this you say: "Okay, it's time to set the table." And you get, "what? Me? But I did that last night..."

My educated guess is that children all along have been relatively unreliable helpers, but beloved anyway – recognized for who they are, only by some. A lot of people look right past children – don't see them there, don't remember what it is to be young and vulnerable. Or don't care to remember. There are adults who will take advantage of children, just because they can.

Jesus said: "whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all." He is communicating with his disciples: you will learn to be a servant, the way a child learns to serve: at once obediently and reluctantly, with too much energy and not enough, effectively and incompetently. Like a child. And like a child, we are loved by someone who is not our equal. God Almighty.

Mother Theresa, Ghandi, Rosa Parks, Martin Luther King, Jr. – all of them worried about how to receive and care for the disenfranchised. Those who follow Jesus into this become just as vulnerable as those they try to protect and care for.

Yet in the kingdom of God, the last is the first and the least is the greatest. "Whoever receives a little child in my name receives me." It leaves open the question of who is the greatest, an open question, for each of us to answer. On balance, who is the greatest? In this church? And in your life?

Discussion questions:

- What do we mean when we say that someone is great? What makes them great?
- What have you learned to value differently in this pandemic?
- *"Who do you say that Jesus is? And who will you therefore be?" Who are you to Jesus?*

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[1] Matthew 10:35