

## Mark 9:30-37

Mark 9:30 They went on from there and passed through Galilee. He did not want anyone to know it; 31 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.” 32 But they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him.

Mark 9:33 Then they came to Capernaum; and when he was in the house he asked them, “What were you arguing about on the way?” 34 But they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another who was the greatest. 35 He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, “Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.” 36 Then he took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms, he said to them, 37 “Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.”

## DISCIPLES DON'T GET IT

The disciples just don't get it. How many times does Jesus have to tell them that his kingdom is not of this world? How many times does Jesus have to tell them that

the kingdom comes by suffering and sacrifice and not by military might?

I'm glad that we're not like those foolish disciples! We listen when Jesus speaks.

Well, most of the time we listen. We want to listen. It's just that sometimes Jesus says things that don't fit in with our way of thinking.

Last week we heard Jesus say something very challenging. We heard him say that if we want to be his disciples then we have to deny ourselves, take up a cross and follow him.

Now that verse is nothing new to me. I've preached many sermons on it. And yet there's a part of me that identifies with the disciples whenever I hear it. What is Jesus talking about? I don't think that I like the sound of that. Maybe I should preach on the Old Testament passage this week!

In our Scripture for today Jesus makes the second of three Passion predictions in the gospel of Mark. Jesus says pretty much what he said last week, "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."

And how do the disciples respond? Mark tells us that Jesus' disciples did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask any questions.

There are several things that can block learning. We can say things in a way that is too complicated. We can use words that are too big.

But, sometimes we have a hard time understanding because we don't want to understand.

Occasionally parents get this kind of reaction from their children. We tell them something they don't want to hear, and they don't respond nor do they ask any questions. Instead later when we ask them why they haven't done this or that they will tell us, "I didn't understand what you meant."

They understood. They just didn't like what we had to say.

I think the same was true of the disciples. They didn't understand because they didn't want to understand, and they weren't about to ask for clarification. They saw what happened to Peter when he rebuked Jesus for such crazy talk. Jesus rebuked Peter in the harshest of terms, calling him Satan.

No, the disciple weren't about to ask Jesus any questions. Asking Jesus questions could be dangerous.

## POWER AND SERVICE

So the disciples talked about the coming kingdom among themselves on the road to Capernaum.

But, the kingdom they talked about was not the one that Jesus was talking about. They talked about an earthly kingdom. They talked about a new Jesus administration deserved the most prestigious job. They couldn't understand the importance of sacrifice and service. But they could understand a path that led to power and prestige.

We can imagine their argument.

Perhaps one thought that he had a higher ranking because he controlled the group's finances. Another claimed that he had a higher ranking because he had a more compelling religious experience having been one of the few who witnessed the Transfiguration of Jesus on the mountaintop.

Others talked about how much they had given up so that they could follow Jesus. Surely they deserved a higher rank in the coming kingdom.

Arguments about position and power have been a part of the church from the very beginning, and we are still having the same arguments today. Like the disciples we just don't get it. We cannot imagine a world that is not measured by position and power.

And yet that is what the cross, the central symbol of our faith is all about. Sacrifice for the sake of others is the measure of God's kingdom. The cross, the sacrifice of Jesus for the sins of the world stands at the center of the Christian faith.

We say it each week after our confession of sin, "In Jesus Christ we are forgiven."

But, practically speaking what does that mean for our lives? In each of the three Passion predictions in the gospel of Mark Jesus meets the rejection and misunderstanding of his message with a teaching about the cross.

Last week he said that the cross means self-denial. It's not all about you and what you want. It's about God and what God is calling you to do. You've not number one. You're number two.

This week Jesus tells his disciples that his kingdom is not about exercising power over others. His kingdom is about serving others.

## WELCOME THE CHILD

I think it's a bit amusing that Jesus first asks the disciples, "What were you arguing about on the road to Capernaum?" But, again the disciples play dumb. They're getting good at this by now. They don't say a word for fear of what Jesus might say to them.

So Jesus sits down (that means he's in teacher mode), and he tells his disciples, "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all." Now I'm sure the disciples were puzzled by this as well. The word used for servant is the Greek word for slave. Who willingly chooses to be a slave?

Sometimes what Jesus says seems as strange as strawberry pizza! I'm sure the disciples would have kept quiet or feigned ignorance on this hard saying as well.

But, Jesus had a way of explaining things that even dull, obstinate and hard headed disciples get the message. In order to get his message across Jesus uses an object lesson.

There was a little child in the home where they were staying. Jesus took the child, brought him among the disciples, put his arms around him and said, “Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.”

## CHILDREN IN THE ANCIENT WORLD

It’s important for us to understand that children in Jesus’ day were to be seen and not heard. This was not a culture like ours where children are valued and spoiled. In the ancient world children were a liability. The best thing you could say about childhood was that one day you would grow out of it.

Pastor Stephen Lewis wrote,

“Even medieval theologian Thomas Aquinas taught that in a fire a husband was first obliged to save his father, then Grandma, then his wife, and then if he had time save the children. During famine children were also last to be fed....survival of the fittest.

When Jesus tells the people to become like little children, he insults them, he insults their culture, and he insults their values.

When children finally reached maturity they finally have value ... at least the boys. This continues in many cultures today. The world is not interested in a world where rank and stature don't matter. We make victims out of the powerless."

But, the Kingdom of God is different. Jesus told us that we can't follow him unless we reorder our ranking system.

A child would not normally be a part of a gathering of adult males. They weren't worth their time. You may remember another story in the Bible when the disciples sought to send parents and their children away because they thought that Jesus had better things to do than bless the children.

But, in what had to be a shocking move, Jesus made a child the center of attention, put his arms around him and said,

"This child, this little person who has no influence or power is the most important person in this room. If you welcome this child into your life, you have welcomed me and the one who sent me."

Or, to put it another way, the way to God's heart is through the heart of a child.

## CHILDREN IN OUR WORLD

Now we have to be very careful in our interpretation of this passage. It would be easy to get quite maudlin about the virtues of children. I love children, but they have all the flaws of any other human being.

As one mother wrote, they're human like us, and can be "noisy, clinging, destructive, self-centered, and surprisingly cruel. The best of them will pluck the whiskers right off a cat if you do not keep an eye on them, or knock other children down for trying to play with their toys."

But, in this passage (unlike others) Jesus is not saying that we should become like children. He is telling us that we should welcome children, that we should welcome the "little ones."

Our faithfulness is measured by how we treat those who are helpless and dependent when no one else is looking. Our faith grows and deepens the more we come to know the "little ones" in our life.

A professor at Stanford who led a Bible study for his Christian colleagues told of how keeping the nursery at

his church with his wife gave him new spiritual insight. He wrote,

“After eight and a half years at Stanford I needed my own safe place where I could be welcomed like a little child. I discovered that place when I volunteered for our church nursery.

Except for my daughter's soccer games and my travel, every Sunday for two years my wife and I served in the "Lambs" Sunday school class for babies three to twelve months old. My failures and successes, my importance or lack thereof as the world judged it, did not matter to little babies.

My PhD didn't cut any ice with parents, a few of whom grew visibly apprehensive when they saw a man in the nursery.

My mentors, Evelyn in her seventies and Miriam in her eighties, taught me lots about generous compassion as they comforted crying babies, assured anxious parents, changed dirty diapers, and without fanfare welcomed hundreds of children across many decades.

They taught me as much about entering the kingdom that Jesus announced as my faculty friends at Stanford.

## THE EXAMPLE OF JESUS

In this passage the child is symbolic of a larger point. And the point is this: we find the presence of God when we care for those who are powerless. We find the presence of God when we welcome those who have been rejected by society.

This is a theme that runs throughout the gospels. Jesus blesses the children. Jesus talks to women in public. (In Jesus' day no one talked to women in public. Like children women were to be seen and not heard.) Jesus touches the leper. Jesus eats with tax collectors and sinners.

In a sermon in his home town of Nazareth Jesus even suggested that God's grace extended beyond the borders of Israel to all the peoples of the world. This was not well received by the folks back home. In fact they wanted to throw him off a cliff.

No wonder the disciples didn't want to ask Jesus any questions. They were afraid of what he might say. Jesus by his actions was turning their world upside down.

In Jesus' world the first are last and the last become first. And the little ones whom society thinks should be seen and not heard become the honored guests at God's table.

## SHANHAIED FAITH

Episcopal Priest David Galloway told a story about a man named Shanghai Pierce. Actually his name was Abel Pierce, but everyone called Shanghai because with his tall gangly frame he looked like a Shanghai rooster ... a long-legged breed of rooster that was popular at that time.

Shanghai was born June 29, 1834, in New Hampshire. At age 17 he decided to stow away on a ship headed for Galveston, Texas, to seek his fame and fortune with only 75 cents in his pocket.

Shanghai Pierce began to work in the cattle business, bartering a year's work for \$200 worth of cattle to begin his own herd. After that first year, he began branding stray cattle and building his herd.

In a short period of time, he had built a herd large enough to earn the title of cattle baron. He was quite a sight on the Texas plain, wearing brocaded vests, broad-brimmed, high-peaked hats.

He even ordered his own gravesite statue prior to his death so that he could enjoy looking at himself. Supposedly, at sunset he would lift a glass to toast himself as he regaled, "Here's to old Shanghai!"

At his ranch, he decided to build a city with everything needed by his employees. He called the town Thank God, Texas, until some of his more refined friends convinced him that Blessing, Texas, had a better and more acceptable feel.

In his later years, Shanghai invited some friends from Boston to visit him on his ranch. He toured them throughout the complex, noting his considerable accomplishments in developing his city.

As they rode through the dusty streets in a buggy driven by two white horses, Shanghai would point out the various landmarks.

"Well, over there's the commissary ...best in the territory.

And over there's the school. Two rooms, not one. And over there's the livery ... the best blacksmith in the state of Texas.

And over there is the saloon ... finest whiskey on this side of the Mississippi."

And the list went on and on, as Shanghai puffed out his chest like his namesake rooster.

As they were continuing on Shanghai's tour, one of his guests spotted the steeple of a church set in a group of mesquite trees. He asked his host,

"Shanghai, do you belong to that church?"

Shanghai spat out some tobacco juice and bellowed, "I don't belong to that church. That church belongs to me."

Our culture has shanghaied us into believing that competition rules the day. We want to be number one, and we are always looking out for number one.

We're trained to believe that from the moment we enter school "as we compete for top grades, as we compete in athletics, as we even compete in art and creativity. Isn't that what our society is all about--competition to see who is number one?"

This view of reality is infused in our personal souls, as well as the tribalism of our own kind and the nationalism of our land.

Here Jesus offers another view of life, a sub-version if you will. A version of reality that says the key to a deep joy in living is that of servanthood, of giving oneself to the other."

It should be encouraging for us to know that Jesus did not abandon those first disciples. Even though they continued to get it wrong and deny him right up until the time he was crucified, Jesus came back to them and lifted them up.

And by the grace of God timid disciples were empowered to act in ways that were contrary to their nature. By the power of the Spirit of Christ, the message of the cross and the resurrection continue to this day.

Despite our tendency to think that it's all about us and our needs, we still have hope because our Savior refuses to leave us to our own selfish ways. He continues to encourage us and call us to a new way of life.

Someone asked Mother Teresa what they could do to help the world, and she said simply, "Love your children." Could it really be that simple? Can we find the presence of God and his kingdom in such a mundane act?

According to Jesus we can. According to Jesus we are called to put our arms around all the little ones who come into our life; according to Jesus the compassionate hug can change everything.

Have you been shanghaied into believing that true joy is found in being number one? Have you let the call to service be shanghaied by a struggle for position and power? Jesus invites you to reconsider what is really important.

This week welcome a little one into your life. Take a child by the hand. Visit a sick friend. Listen to a neighbor who is troubled.

Amen.