

Sermon – “More Powerful Than a Norman Rockwell Image”
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09/19/2021

SCRIPTURE

Mark 9: 30-37

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

Then they came to Capernaum; and when he was in the house he asked them, “What were you arguing about on the way?” But they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another who was the greatest. He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, “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; and taking it in his arms, he said to them, “Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.”

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They say, “Silence is golden.” But I don’t think that was the case with the disciples’ silence in this morning’s gospel. I imagine the silence we hear about was not a golden silence, but an awkward one. A deafening one.

Mark tells us that Jesus and his disciples have arrived in Capernaum and Jesus asks his friends what they were talking about. We hear they had been arguing about which was of them was the greatest. They were like teammates arguing over who is the best on their team or like siblings bickering over who is loved the most by their parents. They had been caught by Jesus. They were embarrassed. They were silent.

Growing up in my family of four boys and one girl, there was sometimes competition between us over who was the best at something. It has evolved into a light-hearted joke between my

brothers and my mom – the question being, “Who does mom love best?” When we are all together, one of my brothers will say, “I’m mom’s favorite, mom loves me best.” My mom gets all flustered and insists she loves all of us the same. But I chime in and say that I am the favorite daughter – which I can say because I am the only daughter. My mom just shakes her head.

But the exchange between Jesus and his disciples in today’s reading was not a light hearted joke between the friends. The disciples had been arguing over who was the greatest. No one was laughing.

Today in our culture, there is a lot of emphasis on competition - on being the best. Sometimes it’s at the expense of others. So when we hear heartwarming stories that are about compassion rather than competition, we smile or maybe even shed a tear.

In 2016, the Novi High School football team, allowed Robbie, their water boy with Down’s syndrome, to suit up and carry in the team flag. His mom was on the side line taking pictures of him in uniform; something special for her to see. She was so proud! In a you-tube video, she explained that the team had been super supportive. Team members or parents had even brought Robbie to practice when she had chemo treatments. You see, she had been fighting cancer and couldn’t always get him to practice herself. Then, during the game, the coach did something Robbie’s mom never expected. He sent Robbie into the game and the ball was passed to him. Both teams helped Robbie score a touchdown. Even the coach had tears in his eyes.¹

Incidents like these make the news when they happen because they touch our hearts. We are grateful to see incidents when caring for another comes ahead of the need to be the best or to score the most points.

¹ YouTube - <https://www.nbc4i.com/news/football-team-helps-water-boy-score-touchdown/>

Robbie, the water boy would not have had the ability of many of the players. But he became a star that day. Robbie's coach and both teams made Robbie's happiness a priority. They exemplified service to their player, a special needs young man, who would not otherwise have been a star. And not only did they lift him up in that game, they had supported him throughout the season by getting him to practice. And they had supported his mom while she was receiving chemo for her cancer. Jesus told his disciples that to be first, one had to be last, the servant of all. These young athletes had embraced service. It was heartwarming.

I think that's what we feel when we hear the rest of this morning's gospel reading – warm hearts. Jesus sat his disciples down after asking them what they had been arguing about. He told them that they should serve others if they want to be great. Then Jesus showed them a little child and brought that child to himself. Jesus embraced the child. It's an image befitting a Norman Rockwell painting. Imagine Jesus sitting with a child on his lap, in his arms. And that child looks happy and loved.

Well, Jesus picking up a child and telling his disciples that whoever welcomes a child welcomes him does not come from a place of sentimentality or warmth. It is not meant to invoke nostalgia. Jesus is teaching his followers about serving those who are powerless in society. The reality of childhood in Jesus' time was vastly different than the reality of childhood today.

As a child, I remember my father saying, "children should be seen and not heard." It was common then. You don't hear it as much these days. Well it would have been appropriate in Jesus' day.

In her book, Not Counting Women and Children; Neglected Stories from the Bible, Megan McKenna points out that in the scripture story about Jesus feeding the crowd of 5000 in Mark's gospel, we hear that Jesus fed five thousand men. And in Matthew's gospel we hear, "And those who ate were about 5000 men, besides women and children." In Jesus' day, women and children weren't counted.² They didn't count.

² McKenna, Megan. Not Counting Women and Children, Neglected Stories from the Bible. (New York: Orbis Books, 1994) p.15

She further explains that in Jesus' day, children were considered the property of their father. In fact the word "child" is very close to the word "slave" in Aramaic. That's not saying that children were unloved, but they did not have value for the family until they were old enough to work.

She gives an example of the family hierarchy in Jesus' day. Let's say there was a fire and the father of the household could rescue only one person. He had to choose between his mother, his father, his wife, or his child. Who do you think it would be? It would be his father. A man would be expected to rescue his father. Then his mother. Then his wife. Then his child. The child would be the last person he should rescue.³

So for Jesus to use a child – who had no societal importance as an example of the one who was to be welcomed, well, Jesus was setting the culture of the day on its head. Jesus was not about welcoming wealthy people, important people or powerful people. He was about welcoming those who had no status, those who society did not consider important, the vulnerable. Glory and status were not important to Jesus. Children had no status, no glory, no importance. Jesus was telling his disciples that when they welcomed children or others who were vulnerable, ostracized, or neglected, then they were welcoming him.

Now, we may have a difficulty with the view of children in Jesus' day. After all, we see children differently today. We put children on a pedestal. Advertisers know it. They spend \$17 billion per year marketing food, toys, and merchandise to children. We buy products because we love our children and want the best for them.

Yet, there are still vulnerable children in our society. According to the USDA, 13.6% of households with children experienced food insecurity in 2019, that's over 5 million children. Households with children were more likely to experience food insecurity than households without children, nearly 1.5 times more likely. And according to two different studies, those

³ McKenna, Megan. Not Counting Women and Children, Neglected Stories from the Bible. (New York: Orbis Books, 1994) p.66

numbers increased in June 2020 to an estimated 27.5 to 29.5 million households with children experiencing food insecurity, or an estimated 13.9 million children.

Jesus used children as the example of the vulnerable, the weak, the powerless in society but there were others as well. We even know some that are vulnerable now - individuals with special needs, those undergoing chemotherapy, those with medical conditions, the frail elderly, the people of the Gulf Coast after the hurricane, the people of Haiti after the earthquake, refugees coming to this country from Afghanistan or Central America.

Jesus said that to serve and to welcome the vulnerable, the weak, and the powerless is to serve and welcome him. And when we do, we also welcome his Father, our Father. We welcome and serve our God.

We are welcoming and serving the vulnerable and our God, as individuals and as a congregation. Today there is a rally for the Crop Walk, sponsored by Church World Service. Did you realize that CWS is a highly rated charity? Their website says it's a "faith-based organization transforming communities around the globe through just and sustainable responses to hunger, poverty, displacement and disaster." CWS is active in the Gulf Coast, Afghanistan, Haiti and in this country – all over the world.

This year's Crop Walk will be held on October 17th. Twenty five percent of the funds raised are returned to Bridgeport to support local hunger fighting efforts. Members of this congregation have been participating in it for many years. Its call to action this year is to "continue to fight against the challenges of disease, disaster, displacement and other concerns that leave people hungry. Join with us as we raise funds to help neighbors near and far get the meals they need today and sustainable food security for tomorrow." If that doesn't sound like serving the vulnerable, I don't know what does.

Jesus' taking that child to himself runs so much deeper than a Norman Rockwell painting. It challenges us to reach out to, to welcome, and to serve the vulnerable in our midst. When we do, we welcome and serve our God and God's child, Jesus. That certainly touches my heart. I think it even touches God's heart.

