

## Inverted Hierarchies of Greatness & Phony Privileges of Prestige

17 Pentecost B Sept 19, 2021 Rev. Dr. David Gardner Tweed

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

<sup>30</sup>[Jesus & the disciples went on] & 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, & they will kill him, & three days after being killed, he will rise again.” <sup>32</sup>But they did not understand what he was saying & were afraid to ask him. <sup>33</sup>Then they came to Capernaum; & 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, & said to them, “Whoever wants to be first must be last of all & servant of all.” <sup>36</sup>Then he took a little child & put it among them; & taking it in his arms, he said to them, <sup>37</sup>“Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, & whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.”

### **Overview -- The Most Challenging Spiritual Practice**

The writers of today’s readings express to God their fears about death & those who do evil. They rage against the cravings, coveting, envy, & selfish ambition that lead to disorder & war, within & around us. Jesus keeps describing what is going to happen to him, but his followers can’t understand; don’t want to understand. Instead, they argue about who is greatest. Putting a quick end to that line of argument, Jesus brings a child into their circle. Embracing the child, Jesus invites disciples into humble service—this is how we draw near to God & God to us. It is easy to be fearful in view of events outside us. It is easy to be thrown off course by feelings inside us or to work hardest for the wrong things. But Jesus invites us to practice what may be the most challenging spiritual practice of all: to love our neighbor. Jesus asks that we look around for someone concrete to invest our time & energy in, someone who cannot return the favor. Jesus challenges us to receive others’ ministry to us, since we are also little children in faith. In real life, there is no way to avoid shame & death. At some point, it comes to each of us. However, for now, wherever we are, we can participate in God’s way of life. Empowered by the Holy Spirit, disciples look where Jesus points & see those whom they can serve. They do not escape death but can know that resurrection is on the other side. Each day, God is with us through dying & rising.

### **Theological Reflection**

How do we hear the words of Jesus—those who would be first must be last, & those who would have status with God will do so through serving the needy? Is it a freeing

word or a burdensome demand? In a Zen-like moment, Jesus tells us that in God's kingdom status is imparted on those not seeking status and supremacy is given to those who completely lack it.

## Quote

Martin Luther King Jr. defined greatness: "If you want to be important—wonderful. If you want to be recognized—wonderful. If you want to be great—wonderful. But recognize that he who is greatest among you shall be your servant. That's a new definition of greatness. (This) means that everybody can be great, because everybody can serve."

## Mark 9:30-37

Mark's gospel is constructed as were other writings in antiquity, with the weightiest part being, not at the ending, but in the center of the book. This excerpt is from the gospel's center & includes the 2<sup>nd</sup> passion prediction (last week was the 1<sup>st</sup>). The early Christian movement needed repeatedly to face the horrific fact that their Messiah had been executed.

More life-altering news is that hierarchies, which religious communities usually erect, are to be rejected. In the 1<sup>st</sup> century, children were considered vulnerable, with no status or power.

Each Sunday we stand before the passion of Jesus Christ, yet we are no better than the original disciples in embodying the countercultural worldview that the crucifixion inaugurated. We must take care not to sentimentalize Mark's reference to a little child, who in antiquity was more likely to be discarded than pampered. Jesus is like the vulnerable child whom we welcome into our midst through the word & the meal.

The Transfiguration has just occurred. Then the disciples fail to cure an epileptic boy of an unclean spirit (vv. [14-29](#)); this has led to them being puzzled. After Jesus cures him, they ask: how could you cure him but we could not? Jesus tells them: that kind of healing requires the power of prayer; it can't be done by earthly means. Now, as they travel from Caesarea Philippi to Jerusalem, they re-enter Jewish territory ("Galilee", v. [30](#)). Jesus again wishes to avoid partial understanding of him & his mission. He again teaches that he, the "Son of Man is to be" (v. [31](#)) *killed*, but adds one new idea: he is to be "betrayed" or *handed over* to people; this is part of God's plan. Both his suffering & betrayal are so beyond the understanding of the disciples that they dare not reveal their ignorance. Jesus now teaches more about being his followers. The disciples have been arguing over rank. Jesus says, in effect: *to be my disciple, you must abandon seeking position & prestige*. He takes an example (vv. [36-37](#)): to

welcome a child “in my name” (because of regard for who & what I am) is to welcome me, & indeed God. In Aramaic & Greek the word for “child” is the same as for *servant*, so v. [36](#) may also speak of welcoming a *servant*, one sent by his master. If so, Jesus is saying: whoever receives the servant receives the master. Whoever receives a child receives Jesus, & whoever receives Jesus receives God, who sent him. Both child & servant are without status. They are unable to repay a kindness, in earthly terms.

## Images in the Readings

Today, some little children are treasured, but we kid ourselves if we forget that the **little child** is still the most vulnerable, manipulated, & readily discarded. We are to welcome those who are vulnerable, manipulated, discarded, as was Jesus himself. To **welcome** others into our community is now a popular Christian understanding. Yet Christ welcomes us all to a community of suffering, of servanthood, of being the last. This message of the cross will nuance how we think about how we welcome others & what we are welcoming them into.

- I. Jesus’ teaching & action are directed to the church whenever it is seduced by the world’s definition of greatness: prestige, power, privilege, pomp & reverence, ownership and protecting all we have, influence, & money to name a few things. The antidote to such a concern for greatness is servanthood. Where do you see the church of today more concerned about its own needs, wants, desires (esp. as it feels entitled, deserving, wanting of them) rather than a focus on serving, sharing and being present to others, esp. others who are unable to “pay that back”? Step back, look for the contrast to see the challenge.
- II. We understand Baptism into the kingdom is literally Baptism into the death & resurrection of Jesus. Do you think people understand that this is the center & purpose of Christian community?...that we are invited, privileged & gifted to live a life of service?...to look for ways to serve & share & love one another? Or is Baptism understood primarily more of an invisible tattoo that gets us into heaven, is our lovely/cute family tradition, an opportunity to come together but we don’t really know what it means for our life? What has to change for this “serving life” to be seen for what it is – a gift of life lived alongside a risen Jesus?