

“Of Such Is the Kingdom of God”

A meditation based on Mark 9:30-37

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Redlands United Church of Christ

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In our passage for today, Jesus is trying to prepare the disciples for his coming betrayal, suffering, and death. But it's like sitting in a math or algebra class and not even understanding what the questions are! Where do you begin? No one wants to speak up and look like stupid. Our text says that they were afraid to ask. After all, the last time they thought they understood Jesus' words (the previous chapter, Mark 8:14-21), he was warning them about Herod and the Pharisees, and they thought he was talking about bread. Oops! In class you don't make that kind of mistake twice in a row. The disciples simply cannot comprehend that their beloved teacher Jesus would allow himself to be captured and killed.

Complicating the picture is the fact that three of the disciples — Peter, James, and John — have just been especially favored by experiencing a mountaintop experience with Jesus, including seeing a vision of him speaking with Moses and Elijah. Somehow these three disciples feel that this places them in a more favored position, above their fellow disciples' rank in the new kingdom Jesus is about to set up. James and John even express a wish to sit on the right and left hand of Jesus' throne (10:35).

Who Is the Greatest?

And now Jesus asks them the question they have been dreading to hear. “What were you all just arguing about?” The fact that the disciples responded with stony silence shows their embarrassment. They had been disputing as to who would be the greatest in the kingdom of God. It's as if they wanted the disciple-of-the-month award for outstanding achievement.

Imagine it: Jesus has, for the second time, told them that he is about to be betrayed into human hands and killed, yet they have more important matters to consider, namely, Who is the greatest among us? One has to wonder about them ... yet what would I have done had I been in their place?

Now Jesus gets into teaching mode, which becomes obvious when he sits down (v. 35) and summons the disciples to come and join him for the lesson.

“Whoever welcomes a child in my name welcomes me”

When Jesus next calls a child and holds him (or her — we don't know the gender from the original story) in his arms, encouraging his disciples to welcome this little child in his name, we can be sure it created shock waves among the listening disciples. Today we read our understanding of children into this story: children who are (sometimes!) cute, innocent darlings, cuddly and adorable, or innocent and trusting. Not so for the listeners that day! Jesus is not

saying anything sweet or sentimental, but rather something perplexing and provocative for his listeners.

When in the gospel stories we are told the number of people in a crowd, such as 5,000 men, “besides women and children”, it was because women and children didn’t count as being significant. We forget sometimes that even in our own western culture, women and children have been placed on an equal footing only in relatively recent times. The concept of “women and children first”, used in many modern emergencies or evacuations, was first popularized as recently as the sinking of the *HMS Birkenhead* off the Western Cape of South Africa in 1852. In many cultures today women and children still have little or no status.

Even in Dickens’ England in the 1800s children were undervalued and mistreated. Today we have child labor laws, though in developing countries there are still many children who suffer from labor abuse!

The Undervalued Child

In Jesus’ day a child was considered a social non-entity. If a boy, he was valued as being the one who would carry on the family name and who would one day inherit the land. That is, if he survived to adulthood. In Bible times, infant mortality from disease, famine, and war could be as high as 30 percent for children under the age of 6, and could reach 60 percent by the time the child became an adult (12-16 years old).¹

Georgetown professor John Pilch refers to the value Mediterranean cultures put on children, even in medieval times. He tells us “Thomas Aquinas taught that in a raging fire a husband was obliged to save his father first, then his mother, next his wife, and last of all his young child” (*The Cultural World of Jesus*)!

Thus it was that if a Bible writer wanted to express his utter worthlessness, he (and it was almost invariably “he”) would say that he was but a child (1 Kings 3:7, Jeremiah 1:7 etc.). This is also why Jesus repeatedly says, “Let the little children come unto me, and forbid them not.” It must thus have come as a complete bombshell to the disciples to hear Jesus say, “Except you become as little children...”

Christ had just finishing telling them in Mark 8 (the previous chapter to today’s reading) that in order for them to gain their life, they had to lose it. Now, when they are naturally trying their best to reach the pinnacle of their career and claim greatness for themselves, he tells them to seek the lowest place instead. We can hardly blame them if they feel more than a little disoriented and confused.

Why should they welcome a helpless child who cannot return the favor? How would this benefit the disciples? First their Teacher tells them he is about to suffer and die — hardly encouraging

¹ Food for thought: Globally it is estimated today that 35,000 children under the age of five die daily, mostly from preventable poverty conditions. It has also been estimated that the financial cost involved in ending most of these deaths is about \$2.5 billion a year — about the same as we spend on chewing gum in this country. —Source: *Behind the Stained Glass Windows: Money Dynamics in the Church*, John & Sylvia Ronsvalle, pp. 218, 219.

news for seekers of that kingdom — and now he instructs them to appreciate and imitate small and insignificant people.

Barbara Brown Taylor, in her comments on these verses (*Bread of Angels*), describes these children as “fillers, not main events. They were gifts of God who would be useful someday ... fuzzy caterpillars to be fed and sheltered until they could turn into butterflies.... At this point, however, they’re more like servants. In fact, the Greek words for ‘child’ and ‘servant’ have the same root.”

The disciples “wanted to know who was greatest, so he showed them: twenty-six inches tall, limited vocabulary, unemployed, zero net worth, nobody. God’s agent. The last, the least of all ... if we want to welcome God into our lives then there is no one whom we may safely ignore.”

Biblical Outcasts

In Bible times widows and orphans were generally viewed as out of luck, being largely defenseless. They were frequently seen as accursed, as having done something wrong to merit God’s disfavor. Naomi, on leaving Moab and returning to her native Bethlehem as a widow, said “Call me no longer Naomi [“Pleasant”], call me Mara [“Bitter”], for the Almighty has dealt bitterly with me. I went away full, but the LORD has brought me back empty; why call me Naomi when the LORD has dealt harshly with me, and the Almighty has brought calamity upon me?” (Ruth 1:20, 21)

In biblical culture it was not only children and widows who were devalued. Other societal outcasts included peasants, farmers, shepherds (think of the Nativity), immigrants, lepers, tax collectors, and prostitutes.

Today we might also ponder the plight of the unprotected migrant worker, the African American and Latino communities in the inner cities, the poor and the poorly educated. We would hopefully empathize with, and seek to assist the young man or woman who has lost their job simply due to their orientation. We might think of the unpopular or awkward student at school, or the unloving and unlovely person we would rather not spend time with. We might reconsider how to treat people who line up in soup kitchens and shelters with more human dignity and compassion.

Being “marginalized” does not necessarily mean belonging to a minority group. In America, rich people are not marginalized. Southeast Asians are generally not marginalized here today. People are pushed to the margins of society because that society will not acknowledge their needs, beliefs, or concerns.

Caring for these people — isn’t this, after all, what true religion is all about? “Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.” (James 1:27)

Helping the helpless, speaking out for those who have no voice, befriending the friendless — of such, surely, is the kingdom of God.