

Deuteronomy 1:9-18
Mark 9:30-37

17th Sunday after Pentecost
Midway Presbyterian Church
September 19, 2021

Great Things in Small Packages

Introduction to the Old Testament Lesson

In our Old Testament Lesson this morning we hear that Moses needs help in leading and caring for the people. Leaders are chosen with assigned duties. A cautionary word is spoken about not showing partiality: “You shall hear the small and the great alike.” Listen to these words from Deuteronomy 1:9-18...

Introduction to the Gospel Lesson

In our Gospel Lesson today we find the disciples arguing about who will be the greatest. Jesus answers by placing a little child in their midst. It’s the one who recognizes and cares for the likes of these, that will be great in God’s eyes. Listen to these words from Mark 9:30-37...

Sermon

We may not pay much attention to the sport of boxing today, but many of us can recall Muhammad Ali, formerly Cassius Clay. Three times he was the world heavyweight champion. Ali was famous for his rope-a-dope. He said he could “Float like a butterfly, sting like a bee.” And he gained the nickname, “The Greatest.” In fact, he loved to shout, “I am the greatest!”

In our Gospel Lesson today from Mark 9, Jesus informs the disciples for the second time (first in Mark 8:31-33) that he will be killed and on the third day rise again from the dead. They do not understand and are afraid to ask for an explanation.

Last Sunday in our sermon we heard James speak of the power of the tongue, for good and for bad. We noted how the Psalmist told of God’s glory being proclaimed by the heavens

and the firmament, though not a word was spoken. (Psalm 19) And Ecclesiastes notes that there is a time to keep silent and a time to speak. (3:7)

Sometimes we talk when we should listen. Other times we remain silent when we should speak out. Sometimes we speak when we really don't know what we're talking about. Other times we are quiet when we could offer a word of comfort, support, or assurance.

In the first unit of our lesson from Mark (vv. 30-32), the disciples are silent when Jesus tells them of his coming death and resurrection because they did not want to believe that he meant what he was saying. It's just easier to keep quiet, to pretend we don't understand, than to risk hearing and accepting something we don't want to believe.

Another silence comes in the second unit of our lesson (vv. 33-37). Jesus and his disciples are back home in Capernaum. They are in a house. And Jesus asks them what they had been arguing about as they followed him on the way. Well, with that the disciples are struck dumb with embarrassment. They are silent. After all, Jesus has just been talking about self-denial, and they were talking about who is the greatest.

William Barclay says that it's odd how something can take its proper place, acquire its true character, when it is set before Jesus. So long as the disciples thought Jesus didn't know, their argument about who was the greatest among them seemed fair enough. But when the argument had to be stated in the presence of Jesus, it then was seen in all its unworthiness. "May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart, be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, my Rock and my Redeemer." (Ps. 19:14)."

But this is a moment that offers Jesus the opportunity to teach them about the nature of true greatness. He sat down, called the twelve together and said, "Whoever wants to be first

must be last of all and servant of all.” In his *Interpretation* commentary on Mark, Lamar Williamson says that Jesus

...does not despise the desire to be first, but his definition of greatness stands the world’s ordering of priorities on its head and radically challenges a fundamental human assumption about achievement.

Next, Jesus takes—not a great athlete, or a beautiful woman, or a wealthy, powerful person—but he takes a little child and puts the child in their midst. Then he takes the child in his arms and says to the disciples, “Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but him who sent me.” Thereby does Jesus pronounce a blessing upon all who work with and care for children. But symbolically the “child” here stands for anyone who needs help and more specifically to new disciples—“babes in Christ.”

The Greeks had a story of a Spartan named Paedaretos. Three hundred men were to be chosen to govern Sparta and Paedaretos was a candidate. When the list of the successful was announced, his name was not on it. “I am sorry,” said one of his friends, “that you were not elected. The people ought to have known what a wise officer of state you would have made.” “I am glad,” said Paedaretos, “that in Sparta there are three hundred men better than I am.” Here was a man who became a legend because he was prepared to give to others the first place and to bear no ill will.

Micah Kiel, Associate Professor of Theology at St. Ambrose University in Davenport, Iowa, notes that some people seek status through cars, clothes, houses, titles, and positions. When the Apple Watch first came out, it was available in aluminum, stainless steel, and gold. A piece of electronics that would likely be obsolete in two or three years, yet there were people willing to pay \$10,000 for the gold version, because they saw it as a status symbol.

While we are impressed with things that are big, it was with a little child that Jesus made his point to his disciples. In her book *Christian Education in the Small Membership Church*, Karen Tye writes of certain “Guiding Principles.” The first principle, she says, is, “Small is Beautiful.” She notes that in our culture the common view is that bigger is better. To be small carries inherent limitations. By definition it is deficient.

Proof that great things can come in small packages is provided to me on a regular basis by those little cherry tomatoes that decorate my salads. My current favorite is the chocolate drop cherry tomato.

According to Karen Tye, a perspective that bigger is always better can feed low morale. People say for example, “We can’t have a real Christian Education program in our church; there just are not enough people.” Yet, she notes that scripture declares that “small is beautiful.” Listen: “A little child shall lead them.” (Isaiah 11:6) “Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.” (Matthew 18:20) “You must not be partial in judging: hear out the small and the great alike.” (Deuteronomy 1:17) “The least among you is the greatest.” (Luke 9:48b)

So, a small church *can* celebrate and cherish its gifts. We are part of the Body of Christ. We can educate; we can worship, we can love, serve, and bear witness to Christ. We can have meaningful fellowship. We can support little children at Calvary and Thornwell Homes. The goal of a small church should not be to become a large church, but to be a more significant church. A church better able to address the needs of people in the community. Albert Einstein said, “Strive not to be a success, but rather to be of value.”

“Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me.” Thereby does Jesus give us new eyes to see. Rather than always looking to the bigger and supposedly better things of life,

Christ guides our eyes to see the small, the insignificant, the forgotten, the neglected. The child Jesus set before his disciples, redirects our eyes and our attention away from the things that would often attract and distract us, to the lowly and humble ones we often overlook. It is as though in that one small child Jesus has captured all the neglected, poor, weak, and seemingly small people of the world.

There is a warning here. Cultivating the friendship of a person who can do things for us, while avoiding those who need us, does not make for a great leader of a great church. Currying the favor of the person of means, while neglecting the simple, humble, ordinary folk, does not make us great. Jesus does not despise the desire to be first, to be great, but his definition of greatness stands the world's ordering of priorities upside-down and challenges a fundamental human assumption about achievement.

And Jesus, with this child in his arms, speaks to us about what does make for a great church. A great church is a servant church that seeks to minister to the needs of all people—especially the weak and the heavy laden, the sick and the sorrowful, the forgotten and the lost. A great church is created by leaders and people who want to serve Christ and his people.

Shortly we will elect Elders to lead us in the coming years. The Officer Nominating Committee has sought those who would assume the office, not for status but for service. People who will welcome a little child, who will open arms to the powerless, who will care for the least of our brothers and sisters. Who will set before us an example of true greatness.

Many thoughtful deeds by individuals in the church may go unnoticed and unrecognized—a card, a call, a visit, a meal, some garden vegetables, a prayer. But they help make for a great church.

A beautiful sanctuary, a large membership, a powerful preacher, an impressive choir, a comprehensive program are well and good, if they give glory to God and further his mission. But in and of themselves, they do not make for a great church. What makes for a great church is caring for people, especially for the least of these, Christ's brothers and sisters.

Like Jesus, who loved all the little children. Who welcomed them with open arms. Like Jesus, who invited the weak and heavy laden to come to him and find rest. Like Jesus, who cared about the sick, the forgotten, the person in grief.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.