

Season after Pentecost [Proper 20B]

September 21, 2021 Haven Lutheran Church, Hagerstown MD

Readings: Jeremiah 11: 18-20; Psalm 54; James 3: 13-4:3, 7-8a; Mark 9: 30-37

Caught in the act! Hands in the cookie jar.... teacher grabs the note you passed in class... the parent waiting in the dark living room when you come in passed curfew.... the person you were gossiping about is standing on the other side of the open door. You know what I'm talking about – you're in the wrong and caught in the act. That's the disciples in today's gospel.

Jesus had just spent special away-from-the-crowds time preparing and teaching the disciples that he will be betrayed, killed and three days later rise again. But just like any of us when we hear something we don't want to believe, something that frightens us, the disciples decide not to ask questions and instead change the subject to something that makes them feel in control and strong again. No sooner are they let out of school and the disciples begin a debate about who among them was the greatest... arguing over which of them would get the bronze, silver and gold medals when they reach the winner's platform on this road of glory. Off the road and once again together inside, Jesus asks, "What were you arguing about on the way?" With that one simple question their pettiness and denial is exposed. Jesus realizes again how little the disciples understood. He discovers again how out of step we disciples can be, even as we do our best to stick *with Jesus* "on the way."

But, thank the Lord, Jesus does not choose to abandon or reject his struggling followers. Instead, Jesus invites his disciples to join him for a "Make-up" lesson in *God's* ways for abundant life. Using their own competitive image, Jesus explains, "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all." In the human realms, greatness is measured by money, power, popularity, prestige. But in the topsy-turvy Kingdom of God, "Jesus tells us, greatness is found in those who serves God by serving others. And in case they would begin to craft a new competition for greatness by racking up the most servant hours and service projects, Jesus takes a child in his arms, "when you welcome one such child in my name you welcome me and you welcome the one who sent me."

Why a child? In his commentary on the Gospel of Mark, Professor Eugene Boring writes, "In the first-century Mediterranean world, the characteristic feature of children was not thought to be their innocence, but their lack of status and legal rights. Jesus is not teaching a lesson about being child-like but speaking to the issue of status. Embracing children, contrary to their cultural evaluation as nonpersons with no 'rights,' was characteristic of the historical Jesus and early Christianity, who accepted the least and the lowly without asking what benefit they could receive from such people. Placing a child in their midst, Jesus speaks directly to the disciples. The child is not a prop or visual aid for a lesson Jesus wants to teach but belongs with the congregation; those who receive [even a child] receive Jesus, and those who receive Jesus receive the one who sent him."¹

Barbara Brown Taylor offers this image to get at Jesus' meaning:

"Do you want to spend some time with God? Then get down on the floor with little Sarah over there. Get fingerpaint all over clothes and laugh at her dumb jokes and never mind that you have more important things to do, like finishing the laundry or earning a living. She is not filler. She is the main event. Opening yourself up to her is better for your soul than finishing a project or getting a raise or even reading a whole book of the Bible.

There will be no payback. Oh, she may shout your name next times she sees you and run to hug your knees but you cannot list her as a job reference or ask her to lend you a hundred dollars to get your car fixed. She is not good for anything. She is not in charge of anything, she cannot buy you anything, she will not even remember your birthday or invite you over for supper with some friends. She has no status, no influence, no income, which makes her great in God's eyes. She is just what you need. And you are able to work on your own greatness by understanding that it is what you do when you think no one is looking, with someone who does not count, for no reward, that ushers you into the presence of God."²

As Boring already mentioned, Jesus "is not just talking about children either. He is talking about all the "little ones" in this world with no status, no influence, no income. Jesus

is daring us to welcome them as bearers of God, to believe that God's hierarchy is the reverse of ours and that greatness is only available to those with no ambition to be great".³ Brain McLaren puts it this way — The disciples were intent on climbing the ladder of success while Jesus was even more determined to descend the ladder of service.⁴ "In this upside-down kingdom of God, the most unlikely people are most likely to be agents of God — the ones who live in the world below our kneecaps,"⁵ with limited voice, and zero net worth. And when we want to seek and serve God, we do not meet the overlooked as someone broken we must fix, nor do we near the ignored as a project that earns us greatness badges. We approach that child of God, of whatever age, as a person to love. "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and who ever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me." (Mk 9: 37)

Some years ago St. Paul School of Theology in Kansas City was seeking a new president. Over one hundred candidates applied for the position. The search committee narrowed the list to five eminently qualified persons. Then somebody came up with a brilliant idea: let's send a person to the institutions where each of the five finalists is currently employed, and let's interview the janitor at each place, asking him what he thinks of the man seeking to be our president. This was done and a janitor gave such a glowing appraisal of William MacElvaney that he was selected President of St. Paul's School of Theology....Somebody on that search committee understood, in a flash of genius, that those who live close to Christ become so secure in his love that they no longer relate to other people according to rank or power or money or prestige. They treat janitors and governors with equal dignity. They regard everybody as a VIP. Children seem to do this intuitively; adult Christians have to relearn it.⁶

Just look around in CVS, restaurants or grocery store... keep your eyes open at your school, job site, neighborhood, church. They may be a stranger, someone you have known for ages or someone you have brushed by with little notice. We will easily find the hidden, the last, the lost, the unattractive, the age-less child of Jesus' teaching to whom we can be

open, kind and generous in his name — not to earn points, recognition or even thanks but because Jesus has told us that when we welcome those who many consider the least, we welcome him ---- we have a face-to-face with Jesus himself and that Kingdom of God — where there is no more injustice or pain or division — comes a breath closer to being realized.

Linda M Alessandri

ENDNOTE

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1. Carlos de la Torre, "Divine Things" September 19, 2021 as posted on <https://www.episcopalchurch.org/sermon/divine-things-pentecost-17-b-september-19-2021/>
 2. Barbara Brown Taylor, "Last of All" Bread of Angels (Cambridge: Cowley Publications, 1997) pp. 133
 3. Barbara Brown Taylor, "Last of All" Bread of Angels (Cambridge: Cowley Publications, 1997) pp. 133-134
 4. Brian McLaren, sermon for the Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost, September 14, 2015 as posted on <https://asermonforeverysunday.com/sermons/b43-the-seventeenth-sunday-after-pentecost-year-b/>
 5. Taylor, p 135
 6. Brett Blair, "The Measure of Greatness," ChristianGlobe Network, [eSermons Resources](#)