

Glen Ridge Congregational Church
September 20, 2009; Mark 9:30-37
Welcoming Jesus
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Let us pray: may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer.

Let's imagine the scene that day as Jesus and his disciples are travelling, walking together – through Galilee toward Capernaum. Jesus knows he doesn't have much time left and there is so much to teach the 12 – they are the ones who have been called to continue the ministry Jesus has started – he's been trying to tell them over and over again what lies ahead but we're told they don't understand and even afraid to ask him. Or I sometimes wonder if they really do hear what he's saying but can't fathom it – can't believe it. Don't we too often hear bad news and tune it out? We react in inappropriate ways because we just don't know how to handle it? Sometimes we're just plain dense, other times we work really hard to overcome the fear and anxiety we feel – but those feelings are always there, though, and affect the way we interact with others.

In any case, we don't really know what those disciples were thinking and feeling but we do know they've heard yet again Jesus tell them that he is to be betrayed, killed, and then three days later he will rise again. And those disciples didn't know what to make of this or what to say, even what questions to ask.

As they walked, the disciples began to talk among themselves – it doesn't sound like they were walking close to Jesus – and the gospel doesn't really tell us what they were saying, but we can imagine based on what Jesus asks them when they arrive at their destination.

Maybe Jesus overheard a conversation something like this: first Peter said to the others, "I am the most important. Didn't I come up with the correct answer when he asked us who he is? Didn't he tell me that I am the rock upon which he will build his new community?"

And then John joins in, "That might be true, but you just made a lucky guess, Peter. You didn't know the answer any more than the rest of us. What he said about the place you might have in his new community only means that he thinks you'd be a good administrator. I think importance is based on love, and he obviously loves me best. I am the most important!"

Now Judas. "The most important person is the one with the money. The world is ruled with money! Everybody knows that. Jesus entrusted the money to me. I am the most important."

Philip adds, "When we were in the middle of nowhere that day and it was time to eat, Jesus turned to me for advice. If he didn't know what to do with all those thousands, and he had to ask me, I must be the most important."

Now imagine – they're in the house and Jesus asks them quietly, what were you arguing about on the way here? Can't you imagine the faces of the disciples – they look at each other, maybe at the floor – they can't look Jesus in the eye – they are silent. Maybe they're a little embarrassed – they remember the teachings: to deny themselves, to take up the cross, to be servants of all. But instead they have been arguing about who

was the most important, who would be the leaders in Jesus' new realm – they had been talking about their own interests, their own place in the scheme of things. Again, not one of them had really understood Jesus' vision.

When Mark's gospel account was written down - probably around the year 60, people's memories of the disciples were still fresh – some of the people who were still alive had known them personally so it made no sense for Mark to ignore their less admirable traits. He portrays the disciples as they are: with all their human challenges: greed, bad tempers, thick-headedness and all. Not very flattering, but real.

The disciples are so human – and I think that makes it easier for us to identify with them. They're real people just like we are. And that gives me encouragement – this discipleship journey has always been hard, confusing – if they don't always understand, it makes sense that I don't always either. But like them, we all keep trying. And the most important thing is that Jesus never quits trying to teach us.

So Jesus tries yet again to get through to his disciples – and he does it in a way that's striking – he's so patient here, isn't he. He doesn't scold them but instead gives them an unexpected object lesson.

The lesson: who ever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all. And how does he illustrate the lesson? By calling their attention to a little child. How can this be? At the time, the disciples were truly shocked.

The reason for their reaction may be a little hard for us to understand – our children are so dear to us – we'll do anything for them. Anything! And as I reflected on this, I couldn't help but think of the young man from Montclair who is on the tenuous long and slow road to recovery after he collapsed at school and the number of people reaching out, praying for him and his family – and I thought about the young woman from our town who died suddenly this summer from meningitis. How our youth reacted, indeed how the entire town came together in sorrow. We care deeply for our children.

And I thought of our SCEEP children who come to us each week for tutoring but even maybe more importantly, to meet with adults who care about them – not because we have to, but because we want to. We enter their world, so foreign to us, but we do it. We do care deeply for our children.

But that wasn't true in Jesus' time – children were among the last, the very least of these. Childhood in society of that time was harsh. Children were often the first victims of famine, disease, war. They were almost non persons in society – they were actually on a par with slaves, they were property. They had absolutely no status!

This concept hit me especially hard this week – sometimes I wonder how far our society has really come - almost every day we read in the paper about children being hurt and dying all over the world, right here in our own area, in neighboring towns and cities – makes us wonder how do we value our children? It all came too close to home as I listened to a woman dealing with the fact that her ex-husband had grabbed his daughter so hard that he left bruises on her arms. And even worse when a seminary classmate called me this week – I hadn't talked to her for a while but I listened as she told me about a funeral she was to do the next day - a funeral for an infant child who had been killed by a babysitter.

How indeed do we treat the most vulnerable in our society? Not just the children, but the elderly – any one on the outer fringes of society. Who among us continue to be among the non-persons of our culture?

Jesus is again advocating a radical new and just ordering of society for his disciples – a new definition of servanthood: caring for children – caring for all those who can in no way repay their efforts. There's nothing in it for the disciples, is there – it's all about serving those who are not strong enough to repay; serving those who are on the outside, those who are socially unfit, unlovable. And isn't that our call as well – as individuals and as church.

Jesus sat a child on his lap in the midst of his followers and said that the welcoming of a little child was a welcoming of Christ himself, a welcoming of God into our lives. All we have to do is look around us at the beginning of worship and see that children are welcome here – what a wonderful ministry we have with our children and youth in this place. But discipleship goes further than that.

It's welcoming those unwelcome everywhere else. Discipleship is turning the standards of the world, of our culture, upside down. Jesus over and over again turns all of the standards of the world inside out: including the people he chose to be closest to him – a fisherman and tax collector over the priest and the scribe. He put a child first and a ruler last. And he eventually paid with his life for this radical teaching.

Many of our confirmands and sponsors served dinners at the Bethel Love soup kitchen last year as a service project – and for some of those young people it was life changing. I'd ask them their impressions during class and they were all moved by the experience – among other things, they were surprised that everyone said thank you. From another: I went expecting to see dirty homeless people – but it wasn't like that at all. They looked like us! And for the first time I met the working poor – it wasn't what I thought it would be at all but it was great. Each of these young people felt connected in new ways to our brothers and sisters in Christ.

You can bet that these confirmands and sponsors remember to bring food for our grocery cart each week – their idea of discipleship has been changed, expanded. They each left their own comfortable lives for a few hours and not only gave comfort but incidentally also received it. Everyone in that dining room was welcomed for who they are – children of God. The servers became the served. The served became the servers. What a liberating experience for all of them.

You may have heard me tell this story before but it's worth repeating: A pastor in a church in upstate New York writes:

In my first parish, a man named Jimmy was a well-known figure in town. Of indeterminate age, he walked the streets at all hours of the day and night carrying a large portable radio on his shoulder and singing to the music at the top of his tuneless voice. Sometimes his elderly mother walked with him. When she did, they argued. Nights when the arguments got violent, Jimmy slept in the church doorway.

Jimmy and his mother began to come to church. The first Sunday they sat in someone else's accustomed seats. Jimmy enjoyed the hymns and sang lustily, but he talked during the sermon, walked up and down the aisles, and had no money for the offering. Regular worshippers began to wait to see where Jimmy and his mother would sit so as not to get too close.

After a few months Jimmy and his mother became an issue in the church. People said, "They're disruptive. They smell. They don't give any money to the offering." Jimmy and his mother were blessedly oblivious to this firestorm.

A year or so later, Jimmy and his mother found an independent church that had a bus ministry, so he and his mother began attending elsewhere. This pastor writes, “My congregation was relieved of coping with Jimmy. I however, was deeply shaken. The church, where people like Jimmy should have been welcome, was no different from anywhere else. Serious questions were raised in that church about telling Jimmy to stay away. And what if others like him began to attend?”

She continues, “Didn’t Jesus come to be among the Jimmies? Didn’t Jesus extend hospitality to people who were otherwise outsiders? Didn’t he heal when he wasn’t supposed to and touch when no one else would?” Twenty two years later, she says, I am still ashamed, for we all - including myself - missed the point of holy hospitality.”

Holy hospitality. What a wonderful term. And what a gift it is to see it in action!

Discipleship is about hospitality. And I wonder again, if discipleship includes welcoming those unwelcome elsewhere, if we really do welcome not only the children, but also the disabled, the strangers, the people unlike ourselves – are we truly living out our call to be disciples? How do we start to do this? We have opportunities right here! By meeting each other where we are, by reaching out to the one sitting next to you, by reaching out to the neighbor you don’t know, and reaching out to all of God’s children who are in our midst. Do we know the names of the people sitting next to us? Behind us? In front of us? Do we invite visitors to coffee hour? How do we fit in that holy hospitality every Sunday morning?

Jesus put a child in the midst of the disciples. We don’t know exactly what happened after that. But ever since, we who call ourselves disciples of Christ have been trying to take seriously those who are put in our midst. If the disciples received that child, if we receive Jimmy and so many others, like or unlike him, how can we help being filled with God’s own self? How can we help seeing ourselves as servants of the God who loves each one of us, knows each one of us by name.

God’s realm is made up of servants. God’s realm is built of people willing to set aside claims of self-importance, who are willing to offer their lives for others. God’s realm is built of people willing to take a risk to truly meet, to truly welcome, those placed among them every moment of their lives.

If all this is true – if we’re really willing to take that risk, then a question like, “Who is the greatest” just doesn’t matter any more. It didn’t to the disciples there on the road to Capernaum then and it doesn’t to us now.

Jesus places a child in our midst, places the stranger among us, places the one devalued by our society in our paths, calling us to offer holy hospitality – it’s then that we too will begin to understand what the realm of God can look like. We too will begin to understand what it is Jesus is teaching us – we’re all searching for that holy hospitality, aren’t we – all of us are searching in the midst of our own stories, fears, and joys. What a gift we can give to each other – and what wonders will we know when we truly share that hospitality with everyone we meet. How our discipleship will be strengthened as we come to recognize Jesus in each other. And how we welcome God into our daily lives. Jesus tells us too, “The kingdom of God has come near to you.” So may it be. Amen.

Let us pray:

We come to worship you, O God, with the awesome glories of your creation ever before us. You offer us a world filled with wonders, not the least of which is the

diversity of the whole human family. You place others in our midst as a reminder. Just as you welcome us into your household, so must we welcome our brothers and sisters. With such hospitality, you remind us of the needs that surround us at every turn: the longing for justice and peace among all your children; the yearning for your healing among all who suffer; the poor, the sick, the homeless, the helpless, the hopeless, the lonely, the dying. Hear us, O God, and grant to us and all your children, your peace. We ask this in the name of our crucified and risen Savior, Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.