

Vanderbilt Presbyterian Church

Sermon

Dr. Thomas P. Harp
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Vanderbilt Presbyterian Church
1225 Piper Boulevard, Naples, FL 34110

Childlike Faith Mark 9:30-37

The sermon would be better titled, “An Upside Down Faith,” because this passage really isn’t about a childlike faith. Indeed, it is a radical passage that challenges just about everything we take for granted. I’m reminded of Mary’s song after she learned she was pregnant by the Holy Spirit: “Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name. His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.” (Lk 1:48-53) Scattering the proud, toppling the powerful, lifting up the lowly, feeding the hungry, sending the rich away empty. Not your usual picture of Jesus.

So what’s going on here? Clearly the disciples could tell something was about to happen. But what? Since the Transfiguration they could see a change in Jesus. Perhaps they noticed a new determination. Or maybe just the fact that he’d begun moving towards Jerusalem caused them to take note. Can’t really be sure what tipped them off, but they sensed that something was up. Unlike other times they were passing through Jesus wanted to travel secretly ... Didn’t want anyone to know he was around. To top it off, this is the second time he’d talked about his death and resurrection. Can’t miss it. Something’s about to happen.

In response to the uncertainty, the disciples started arguing over who’s the greatest. What’s the connection? One minute, Jesus is talking about dying and being raised from the dead. Then next minute the disciples are arguing among themselves over who is the greatest. It just doesn’t add up. You’d think they’d ask him why he thought the Son of Man would be killed. After all, nobody else thought that. The prophet Daniel described one like a Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven. That one, Daniel said, would be given everlasting dominion and kingship that could never be destroyed. But Jesus said the Son of Man would be handed over and killed. Quite a contrast. You’d think the disciples would be curious about that. But no, they just got into an argument over who was the greatest.

Or you’d think they’d try to talk him out of going to Jerusalem. If death awaited him there, why go? Of course, Peter did that just a few verses back. Remember? That was the first time Jesus told them he would be killed. Peter had taken him aside and rebuked him. That got a reaction—Big time! Remember? “Get behind me Satan?” Jesus told Peter. Maybe that’s why they didn’t try to talk him out of it. Still you’d think they’d be curious enough to ask questions. Or maybe just walk in silence, wondering about things. But no! They get into an argument over who’s the greatest. Doesn’t make sense. How do you get from a death notice to an argument over who’s the greatest? Were they arguing which one would succeed him as leader of the group? We don’t really know. What we know is: they were arguing over who was the greatest.

Truth is, they missed the whole point. They simply didn’t understand what Jesus was up to. Nor did they know really who Jesus was. They made assumptions, just as you and I do. And they ran with their assumptions, again just as you and I do. A famous preacher once imagined a Sunday morning on which the preacher is saying blue, blue, blue; the people are thinking yellow, yellow, yellow; and what is communicated is green, green, green. That might make for a great stewardship sermon, but in this passage

Jesus is saying cross, cross, cross; the disciples are thinking crown, crown, crown; and all that communicated was misunderstanding. The disciples got caught up in issues of self-importance. They had no idea crucifixion was in the plans.

Now maybe you're wondering what all this has to do with us? People sometimes wonder what these ancient stories have to do with twentieth-century concerns. I agree. We don't want glorified Bible studies for sermons. At least not the kind that teach us what the Bible says without any application to our own lives. We want to know what it means for us today. We want to know what this story has to do with the price of tomatoes in Publix. We want to make a connection between what happened in Jerusalem and what's happening in Washington. We want to know how these stories speak to our grief, and what they say about the lives we live. We want sermons to address us about our troubles, our concerns, our lives. So who cares if the disciples argued all the way home about who was number one? What's that got to do with us?

Seems to me our whole way of life is more or less centered on ourselves, our competence, our generosity. Our society focuses on who's the greatest, who's the strongest, who's the richest, and so on and so on. That is not what Jesus had in mind for his disciples, not what Jesus expects of you and me. But note how Jesus dealt with that. He didn't criticize the disciples, although they expected him to. He didn't judge them. He merely took a child and set the child in their midst. He said, whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me. And whoever welcomes me, welcomes him who sent me. You really want to serve Jesus? Change your whole way of thinking. Turn your whole way of life upside down. You want to be the greatest, be a servant. Better still, serve the last, the least. Treat them as you would treat Christ.

In Jesus' days children had no rights. They were totally dependent on their parents. In Roman society, a father could kill his child without fear of penalty. Children were nothing. The people weren't against children, mind you. It's just that the child had no rights. In that first century social order, the child was the least important. Jesus placed the symbol of insignificance in their midst. Jesus pointed to a portrait of powerlessness and said: "Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me." He may as well have said, "This child has as much status as I. Welcome the child and you welcome me. And not only that, when you welcome me, you welcome the God who sent me."

To welcome the powerless is to serve Christ. To show hospitality to one who can never possibly return it is to serve the Lord. To feed those who will never have the opportunity to invite you to dinner is to serve the Lord. The measure of a church is the love the people have for each other, and the love they show for the least of society. The measure of a church, then, is its heart and mission work. But be careful. When you hear one church comparing itself to another, as if one were better than another, watch out. To turn mission giving into a measure of importance is to misunderstand completely. Until our minds have been changed. Until we begin to see the world differently. Until we love with the love of Christ, we are no different than those disciples, competing with each instead of serving each other in Christ's name.

How can you argue who's greatest after hearing Jesus speak of his death and resurrection? Wrong question. Question is, how do you get disciples who are concerned about being the best, to change their minds, to change their lives, to focus instead on serving the least? Well, you show them a child. And you teach them to love the child. You introduce them to the poor. You teach them to feed the poor. The church that welcomes the least valued person in society, the church that seeks serve the least among those of the world — that is the church we are called to be. For in a church like that the love of Christ is at work. In that church, in this church, there is hope: hope for the least, hope for the greatest, hope for all.