

Mark 9:30-37

September 23, 2018

Grace and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

These disciples in Mark – you have to love them! They have a way to make me feel good about myself when I have failed as Jesus' disciple. Just pull out the gospel of Mark and watch the comedy of errors they make and the lack of understanding they have time and time again. Thanks Peter for rebuking Jesus last week immediately following his first prediction he has to go to Jerusalem, suffer, die and rise again or for the mountain top experience in which Jesus is transfigured right before his eyes (with James and John) as Moses and Elijah appear with him and Peter, not knowing what to do or how to respond, blurts out they ought to build 3 shelters for Jesus, Elijah, and Moses. Or our passage this morning in which we see those same disciples seemingly clueless after Jesus tells them for the second time what is about to happen to him in Jerusalem. However, it seems Peter and the others may have learned something as this time they don't say a word. The text tells us they still didn't understand but were afraid to ask. After all, who wouldn't be after recalling Jesus' rebuke of Peter calling him Satan for setting his mind on human things.

They could have left at that. But no, as they traverse along the way they begin to argue yet again. It seems their minds are still set on human things as they were arguing about which one of them was the greatest. I often wonder just why this argument ensued? Perhaps, they had indeed heard what Jesus was telling them and maybe it was those last few words Jesus will rise again began to settle in. They may not yet have fully grasp just exactly what that meant; but, perhaps they sensed it had to be a good thing of which they wanted to be part of. Perhaps,

this rising again meant Jesus would eventually arise to the top of the throne, over taking the Roman Emperor, and once again restoring Israel to its former glory. If this happens, which one of them was going to be right by his side and garner the riches, fame, and power that certainly would come their way. Or perhaps, they did see a glimmer of light Jesus may be ascending to his Father, just as God had whisked Elijah away in a whirlwind centuries ago. If that happens, they want to be first in line for the ride. Or perhaps, in their uncertainty and fear they do what comes naturally to all of us. They turn inward and think about themselves, which doesn't last long as Jesus quickly diverts their eyes and attention outward stating, "Whoever wants to be first must be last and servant of all."

Then add in an interesting twist on the situation at hand. Jesus calls forth a young child and gives him or her a spot among the twelve disciples seated with Jesus. But just not a spot, but he takes this child into his arms and states, "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me." We have no idea whose child this was or where he or she came from. It seems up to this point, the child was just hidden from our eyes and had zero impact on the text but not to Jesus. He sees this child and this child was important to Jesus. And he advises the disciples they, too, ought to open their eyes to recognize and welcome such a child because in doing so they welcome him and the one who sent Jesus. Peter, James, and John know the answer to who sent Jesus because in the transfiguration upon the mountaintop, just verses before our passage, they were privy to a voice from a cloud stating, "This is my beloved Son. Listen to him."

Jesus sees this child. He calls the disciples to see this child and he calls the church to see this child and welcome the child. The Reverend Dr. Barbara Lundblad (ELCA), in a sermon on this passage, explain why as she writes:

(We are to see and welcome the child) not because the child is innocent or perfect or pure or cute or curious or naturally religious. Jesus wanted them to welcome the child because the child was at the bottom of the social heap. In Mark children are often sick or disabled: Jairus' daughter is near death when her father kneels before Jesus; the Syrophenician woman's little daughter is possessed by an unclean spirit; and just before today's text, a man brings his son to Jesus. The boy had experienced terrible convulsions since childhood and the disciples weren't able to heal him. But Jesus commanded the spirit to leave the boy, then lifted him to new life. Children in Mark are not symbols of holiness or innocence, but more often they are the victims of poverty and disease. Jesus brings the child from the margins into the very center. The child is not a symbol but a person, a little person easily overlooked, often unseen and unheard.ⁱ

The point Jesus makes is crystal clear. The kingdom of God he is ushering in stands in stark contrast to the kingdom of the world in which so many are without voice and go unseen. Jesus, yet again, teaches the kingdom of God has been opened up to all and that includes the most vulnerable. Not only does it include them, but Jesus equates welcoming them as the same as welcoming him and welcoming God.

So how does the church see the child yet today? Sure, we are seeing the hungry child when we donate food to the pantry, put quarters in the tube to help fund children's hunger programs in our schools, donate and provide clothing from the Hope Chest to families who come in, or open our doors as we will tonight welcoming all to come and share a meal. But, that can't be the stopping point. We must continue to see the children. To see the Son of God holding each one in his arms. We must continue to advocate for the 3 million plus children within our nation living in hunger each day or the 5% of children under 18 who live with no

health insurance and may not have access to quality health care. We must advocate for budgets that continue to assist the 39% of Iowa school children enrolled in free or reduced lunch programs or provide access to healthy food for the 381,000 people in Iowa receiving assistance from the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), 70% of who are families with children. 2017 statistics reveal that 1 in 6 Iowa children struggle with hunger. In the most affluent nation in the world, how can this be? How can we let it happen? As budgets shrink, monies are diverted elsewhere, and difficult decisions are made it is our calling to speak out and stand up for these children.

By the next chapter of Mark, the disciples will have forgotten the children as they scold parents who were bringing their children to Jesus for a blessing and to hear those words, “You are a beloved child of God.” Jesus won’t have any of it as he reminds those disciples and the church “Let the children come to me. Don’t stop them! For the Kingdom of God belongs to those who are like these children.” We can’t forget either!

God has named us as God’s own. Jesus has laid down his life so that we may live. God’s abundant love comes to us anew every single day. We are blessed in so many ways. But this love of God and this kingdom of God are not only ours. It extends to all! This is the gospel of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ! Good news for us but also good news for all people!

ⁱ Rev. Dr. Barbara Lundblad, from sermon called “A Hopeful Fanatic”; www.Day1.org