

Proper 20B 2018 Sermon

Mark 9:30-37

Jesus and his disciples passed through Galilee. He did not want anyone to know it; for he was teaching his disciples, saying to them, "The Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him, and three days after being killed, he will rise again." But they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him.

Then they came to Capernaum; and when he was in the house he asked them, "What were you arguing about on the way?" But they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another who was the greatest. He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all." Then he took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms, he said to them, "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me."

This past Thursday morning, as I was driving back into town from Denver, I stopped at Walmart to pick up, among other things, some tomatoes. I get the Roma tomatoes, which seem to be popular, since there were four full crates of them on display. A Walmart employee – a young man – was working in the produce section as I approached, and he said, "Can I help you find something?" Now, I don't know about your experience at Walmart, but I don't often have employees, unsolicited, out of the blue, offer to help; so I considered this to be unusually thoughtful and courteous. But I was standing right in front of the Roma tomato bins, so I said, "Thank you, but I found what I was looking for," and I reached for some tomatoes in one of the crates. "These are the freshest," the young man said, and he pointed me to a different crate than the one I was reaching for. Again, I found this unusual, and I thanked him, and started picking tomatoes from the crate with the fresher tomatoes and putting them in one of those clear plastic bags. "Anything else?" he asked, and I mentioned that I couldn't find any of the twist ties to secure the tomatoes in the bag (if I don't do that, they get out of the bag in my trunk and roll around), and the young man quickly found some twist ties and delivered them to me.

Now, the fact that I found this experience to be so unusual may say something about the fast pace of our culture these days, or the impersonal experience of shopping in modern, corporate, discount megastores – as opposed to some of the locally-owned "mom-and-pop" stores of my youth. But later that day, as I started working on this sermon, these words from today's Gospel jumped out at me: the disciples "had argued with one another who was the greatest." And I wondered: What *criteria* were they using to determine greatness? Which one of them spent the most time with Jesus? Or maybe which one had seen the greatest miracle, or perhaps *performed* the greatest miracle? Then I asked myself, "What makes a modern corporation like Walmart great?" And after my experience in the produce

section, **my** answer was, “Having employees who serve Walmart customers like that young man served me. That’s what makes a store great.”

Of course, that is not usually how our *society* judges the “greatness” of large corporations – at least not according to what we read in the Financial news, or hear on “The Nightly Business Report.” Society as a whole has trained us – has it not? – to think that what makes a large corporation great is their annual profit, their growth, their market value, or their stock price; *not* how they treat their employees or customers.

And we are led to believe that our *nation* is great when the stock market is booming; we *don’t* judge the greatness of our nation by how we treat the most vulnerable among us, or those on the margins of our society, or by how many refugees fleeing war and famine we take in. In short, we don’t judge the greatness of our corporations *or* our nation by **Jesus’** criteria: “Whoever wants to be first [greatest] must be last of all and servant of all.”

When was the last time you heard a politician run for office with the campaign slogan, “I will be last of all and servant of all”? The answer, of course, is: “Never.” Rather, politicians campaign by running down their opponents and proclaiming how much *greater* **they** are than their opponents – just like the disciples in today’s Gospel argue over who is the greatest.

And let’s face it: don’t we unconsciously compare *churches* the same way? Churches are “great” (or not) according to how big they are, or (and this is a common term used in many church publications) “how many butts are in the pews.” But is that really how we *should* be judging churches – by the number of butts in the pews? Or should we instead be asking, “How mature is the spirituality of church members? How compassionate is the church toward the least, last, and lost?” Jesus says in our Gospel that the greatest are those who are “last of all and servants of all.” How well does a particular church embody those characteristics and actions?

In my sermon two weeks ago, I mentioned that the Bible is often difficult to understand, in part because of the cultural differences between 1st Century Palestine and 21st Century America. Our Epistle reading that day exhorted us to “care for orphans and widows in their distress,” and I pointed out the fact that the term “orphans and widows” was used in Biblical times to refer to any persons who were “living a marginal existence in extreme poverty,” and I noted that *The Message Bible* translated “orphans and widows” with the modern equivalent “the homeless and the loveless.”

In today’s Gospel, we are presented with *another* category of persons who were viewed very differently in 1st Century Palestine than they are in 21st Century America: children. In their book *Social-Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels*, Professors Malina and Rohrbaugh write this about children in the society

of Jesus' day: "Children had little status within the community or family. A minor child was on a par with a slave... The term 'child/children' could also be used as a serious insult (see Matt. 11:16-17)." ¹ My friends, this is a far cry from the *cherished* place children hold in our society today! Just think of how we fawn over babies and toddlers, and how parents bend over backwards to haul their children all over town (and out of town) for music lessons, soccer games, or ballet. To expend that much energy on a child (the social equivalent of a slave) in Jesus' day would have been abhorrent and unthinkable.

So when Jesus, in today's Gospel, takes a little child and places the child in the midst of the disciples, and puts his arms around the child, we have to see that through the eyes of a 1st Century Jewish male, who would have been greatly offended, since that child held the same place in the social hierarchy as a slave, and would have no business being in the midst of adult male company. And we have to hear Jesus' words the way a 1st Century Jewish male would have heard them when Jesus said, "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me."

Now, what class of persons in 21st Century America might have the same status in society's eyes as a little child, or a slave, did in Jesus' society? Perhaps the homeless and loveless? Addicts? Ex-convicts? The mentally ill? Immigrants or refugees? And when church members encounter these folk whom society sees as "trash," or at best "second-class citizens," do we welcome them as if they were Jesus, as today's Gospel teaches us to do?

My friends, I believe that one of the central messages of today's Gospel for us is that we should examine the unconscious, assumptive criteria by which we **judge** people, nations, and institutions in our world. Is a corporation really "great" simply because their stock price goes up? Or is it great because of how they treat their employees and customers? Is a nation "great" simply because it has a booming economy and low taxes? Or is it great because of how that nation treats "little children" – the most vulnerable, the outcast, the foreigner, the homeless, the addicted, the poor, the mentally ill, the refugee? Is a church "great" simply because it has lots of butts in the pews and is numerically growing? Or is it great because it seeks to embody the life, teaching, and spirit of Jesus, and to be servant to all, especially the "little children" – the outcasts, the stranger, the poor?

My friends, I admit that, over the years, the main reason I have shopped at Walmart is because I can buy most everything I need in one store and at a cheap price. But let me tell you, if I knew that every time I walked in the door of a store I would be treated with the same kindness and courtesy with which that young man in the produce section treated me, I would keep coming back no matter what the price. For you see, money can't buy what that man offered me that day: he noticed me, had respect for me as a human being, paid attention to my needs, and gifted me with an unexpected kindness that was palpable. Yes, he made my day.

And he made me question the assumptive criteria I have absorbed from my culture and society regarding what I consider to be “great.”

“Jesus sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, ‘Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.’ Then he took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms, he said to them, ‘Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.’”

AMEN

¹ Bruce J. Malina and Richard L. Rohrbaugh, *Social-Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992, pp. 117-118