

“Called to be Servants”
Mark 9:30-37
San Dimas Community, United Church of Christ
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This gospel text tells a familiar story. It’s about people seeking self-gratification and personal honor. Jesus is talking about suffering and death, but the disciples are talking about their prestige as leaders in the “movement” this Jesus has initiated. When their teacher stops and asks what the disciples were talking about, they are too ashamed to answer him. They’ve been caught with their hands in the cookie jar--taking honor that is not theirs to have.

Jesus doesn’t shame them by direct confrontation. Rather, like a good teacher/rabbi, he sits down and begins to teach the lesson. Then he takes a child and puts his arms around the child and says, “Look, this is what you should strive to become. Be like this!” This text or its parallel is often used when a child is baptized in order to affirm how important to Jesus children are. It makes us feel good that Jesus values our children the way we do. The radical idea that Jesus was teaching may escape our notice because we live today and not in his ancient culture. But then Jesus was always proclaiming a radical God!

A child back then was at the very lowest rung of the social ladder. This remained the case in Mediterranean cultures even through medieval times. “Thomas Aquinas taught that in a raging fire a husband was obliged to save his father first, then his mother, next his wife, and last of all his young child”¹.

It was not at all like today when our lives as parents are often completely oriented around the needs and activities of our children. Back then, children were barely seen much less heard. Jesus uses this paradox to make it perfectly clear that the first will not be the prestigious leader granted privilege. Jesus says to be first means to be a child.

Usually we think of the value of a child tied to his or her innocence or vulnerability. The fact that children are dependent conveys a humility to which we respond as those who love them. But I began thinking of other characteristics of children that I admire, such as curiosity. Children are often very curious. They pose those “but why” questions that sometimes drive us nuts but they also show innate eagerness to understand their world. Then there’s the childlike characteristic of courage. I often think that if children were afraid every time they lost their balance and fell, they’d never learn to walk. Children are not easily discouraged. They have the courage to try again, and again, and again.

Also, children have great passion. They are enthusiastic -- and if they latch on to something that connects with a deep passion, then extraordinary gifts are revealed.

¹ The Cultural World of Jesus, Sunday by Sunday, Cycle B.

This week at the fair I saw Alison Kopanke's award-winning video. She has a passion for film and it shows! Perhaps you've been hit up by Melissa or one of her salespersons because she's passionate in pursuit of winning a certain prize based on sales for her school fundraiser. Particularly as children get a little older, I've found that they are eager and searching for something they can be passionate about, something worth devoting their lives to doing.

Children are also persistent. The Bible tells of a widow who nagged a judge for justice. And the nagging produced results. This kind of persistence is familiar to many parents. Children also like to please, they like to serve, and this theme of servanthood is definitely picked up by Jesus. The person who is first must be the servant of all. And Jesus provides in his life a complete model of servanthood. He insists on serving others; he insists on washing feet; he insists that all be fed. He doesn't waste a lot of energy on those who already have servants to wait on them; he goes and serves those without any hope of a servant to fulfill their needs.

If we do like Jesus, then we become servants also. This does not mean we become self-abasing servants entrapped in societal structures that are wrong. Jesus was not a victim. He chose servanthood. Sometimes being a good servant includes those other childlike characteristics I mentioned earlier: curiosity, courage, passion, and persistence.

To serve others we must be curious as to what they need: We have to notice them! I remember how Allison would say the store clerks ignored her when she was trying to buy me a present because they assumed she had no money. One who serves is curious about the needs of those they serve.

To be a servant also means to have courage in seeking the welfare of those they serve sometimes at their own cost. And to be a servant means we are passionate in our service. It becomes our heart's deep longing. Have you found what your heart is passionate about?

Jesus was passionate in servanthood. He doesn't appear to have had a lot of "down time." He set his face towards Jerusalem prepared to see his servanthood to the end. And Jesus is persistent; he doesn't give up, he doesn't retreat; he presses on. He's passionate about his life's meaning and destiny, and he persists no matter what.

The disciples took awhile to learn what being a servant meant. This is human nature. It always helps if one has good models, good examples of servanthood. I look out from this place of privilege and see many good examples of being servants. It is a privilege to be part of this community of those who serve. As we share our lives together, no doubt we'll have ample opportunity to serve each other. What a gift to give and to receive!

Our UCC Statement of Faith says "God calls us into the church to accept the cost and joy of discipleship, to be servants in the service of the whole human family..." It's a lot easier to notice the needs of the vulnerable who are close to us, and who we see all the time. It's quite a bit more challenging to notice the needs of those distant from us.

Next week we have an opportunity to notice those far away--to bring them near--to make them our neighbors. Besides our gifts to this church we will have an opportunity to give to our Neighbors in Need. It is very rewarding to me to know that when I see suffering in the world, either sudden disasters like a tsunami or long term suffering like in Darfur, that my money becomes a servant to a world in need. My gifts touch the vulnerable, like Jesus' arms wrapped around that child a long time ago, and I am privileged to be a servant.

We can't always determine how God will call us to serve this world. But it is with joy that we watch around us the acts of grace, of service, arising from caring curiosity, acted upon with great courage, passion and persistence, and as we watch these acts of grace the melody of God's world becomes more beautiful and pure because we pause to ask the question "Won't you let me be your servant?"