

“Status Statement”

Mark 9:30-37

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San Dimas Community, United Church of Christ

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Today’s text tells a familiar story about people seeking to make themselves more important than they are. Their self-worth is tied to status and position. While Jesus is talking about his suffering and death, the disciples are talking about their prestige as leaders in the “movement” this Jesus has initiated. When Jesus stops and asks what they’re talking about, they are too ashamed to answer. They’ve been caught with their hands in the cookie jar--trying to grasp positions of honor 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 gospel parallel is often used when a child is baptized in order to affirm how important to Jesus children are. Yet in Jesus’ day, his care for children was a radical idea! 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. The scholar, 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” (The Cultural World of Jesus, Sunday by Sunday, Cycle B).

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. This is a radical statement about status in God’s kingdom.

There is much about children that we admire. They are curious. They pose those “but why” questions that sometimes drive us nuts but that also show innate eagerness to understand their world.

Then there’s the childlike characteristic of courage. I often think that if a child was intimidated 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. 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 servant hood 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 servant hood. He insists on serving others; he insists on washing feet; he insists that all be fed. He doesn’t waste a lot of energy waiting on those who already have servants; he goes and serves those without any hope of a servant to meet their needs.

If we are to be like Jesus, then we become servants also. This does not mean we become self-abasing servants entrapped in societal structures that are not just. Jesus was not a victim. He chose servant hood. Servant hood was for Jesus the ultimate “Status Statement.”

Servant hood means we must be curious as to what others need: We have to notice them and be attentive to others.

Servant hood means to be courageous in seeking the welfare of others sometimes at our own cost. And servant hood calls for passion in our service. It becomes our heart's deep longing.

Jesus was passionate in servant hood. He doesn't appear to have a lot of "down time." He sets his face towards Jerusalem prepared to see his servant hood 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.

Many of you have heard that Tina Nelson died on Friday. She was at peace and although she left us too young, her death was beautiful because all who she had served in life (her large family and extended friends) surrounded her and they became her servants, serving and loving her till the end. This kind of servant hood is sacred and holy.

The disciples took a while to learn what true status is; what being a servant meant. This is human nature. It always helps if one has good models, good examples of servant hood. I look out from this place of privilege and see many good examples of servant-hood. It is a privilege to be part of this community who serves. As we share our lives together, no doubt we'll have ample opportunity to serve each other.

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 become their servants. Besides our gifts to this church we will have an opportunity to give to 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. And we will also be servants to the hungry within our community of San Dimas and LaVerne as we walk with Hope Partners to raise money in support of services for those in need. Our gifts will touch the most vulnerable, like Jesus' arms wrapped around that child a long time ago.

We can't always determine how God will call us to serve this world. But we know what true status looks like in God's way of things. True status is to give our all to serve "the least of these" in acts of service, arising from caring curiosity, acted upon with great courage, passion and persistence. Because in God's world the greatest status statement is this: "Won't you let me be your servant?"