

Mark 9: 30-37

I LOVE THE UNSELFCONSCIOUSNESS OF CHILDREN IN WORSHIP. I LOVE THEIR CURIOSITY, THEIR INTENSITY, THEIR SURE SENSE OF WELCOME AND BELONGING. I LOVE THAT THEY'RE HONEST AND WHOLLY THEMSELVES IN THE PRESENCE OF GOD. WHEN THEY'RE DELIGHTED, WE CAN SEE THEIR JOY, CLEAR AND PLAIN. WHEN THEY'RE BORD, HUNGRY, SAD, SCARED, OR IRRITABLE, THEY LET US KNOW THAT, TOO.

IN THIS MORNING'S GOSPEL READING, JESUS TAKES A LITTLE CHILD INTO HIS ARMS, TURNS TO HIS DISCIPLES, AND SAYS, "WHOEVER WELCOMES ONE SUCH CHILD IN MY NAME WELCOMES ME, AND WHOEVER WELCOMES ME WELCOMES NOT ME BUT THE ONE WHO SENT ME."

ON THE SURFACE, THIS TENDER GESTURE IS SO SMALL AND SO SIMPLE, WE EASILY MISS ITS RADICALISM. BUT CONSIDER THIS: JESUS *DOESN'T* SAY, "WECOME THE CHILD BECAUSE IT'S A KIND OR LOVING OR GENEROUS THING TO DO." HE SAYS: DO YOU WANT TO SEE WHAT GOD LOOKS LIKE? ARE YOU CURIOUS ABOUT THE TRUEST NATURE OF DIVINE GREATNESS? THEN WELCOME THE CHILD. WELCOME THE CHILD, AND YOU WELCOME GOD.

CHILDREN IN THE TIME OF JESUS WERE REGARDED AS NONPERSONS, OR NOT-YET-PERSONS, POSSESSIONS OF THEIR FATHER IN THE HOUSEHOLD. FOR JESUS TO HOLD UP A CHILD AS AN EMBLEM OF LIVING IN GOD'S HOUSEHOLD WAS TO OFFER SERIOUS CHALLENGE TO SOCIAL NORMS OF THE DAY.

WELCOME THE CHILD. A CHILD WHO CAN NEVER REPAY YOU. A CHILD YOU CANNOT LIST AS A JOB REFERENCE OR ASK THEM TO LEND YOU \$100 TO GET YOUR CAR FIXED. CHILDREN ARE NOT IN CHARGE OF ANYTHING, CANNOT BUY YOU ANYTHING, WILL NEVER REMEMBER YOUR BIRTHDAY OR INVITE YOU OVER FOR SUPPER. A CHILD HAS NO STATUS, NO INFLUENCE, NO INCOME, WHICH MAKES THEM GREAT IN GOD'S EYES.

DO YOU SEE WHAT JESUS IS UP TO HERE? IT IS ONE OF HIS LESSONS IN THE TOPSY-TURVY KINGDOM OF GOD, WHERE THE FIRST SHALL BE LAST AND THE LAST SHALL BE FIRST AND EVERYONE WHO THINKS HE OR SHE IS ON THE TOP OF THE HEAP IS IN FOR A BIG SURPRISE. JESUS IS NOT *JUST* TALKING ABOUT CHILDREN, EITHER. HE IS TALKING ABOUT ALL THE LITTLE ONES IN THIS WORLD WITH NO STATUS, NO INFLUENCE, NO INCOME. HE IS DARING US TO WELCOME THEM AS BEARERS OF GOD, TO BELIEVE THAT GOD'S HIERARCHY IS THE REVERSE OF OURS AND GREATNESS IS ONLY AVAILABLE TO THOSE WITH NO AMBITION TO BE GREAT.

THIS WHOLE LESSON CAME ABOUT BECAUSE HE CAUGHT THE DISCIPLES PLAYING "WHO'S THE GREATEST" ON THE ROAD TO CAPERNAUM. IF YOU WERE EVER CAUGHT PASSING A NOTE IN SCHOOL, THEN YOU KNOW HOW THEY FELT. "WHAT WERE YOU ARGUING ABOUT ON THE WAY?" HE ASKED THEM AND NO ONE SAID A WORD, BECAUSE THEY HAD BEEN

FIGHTING ABOUT WHO WAS THE BEST, THE MOST FAITHFUL, THE MOST-LIKELY-TO-SUCCEED DISCIPLE. PETER, JAMES, AND JOHN..THE FIRST THREE DISCIPLES JESUS CALLED; WHO TRAVELED WITH HIM. AMONG THEM, PETER FIGURED HE HAD IT ALL SEWED UP BECAUSE HE WAS THE FIRST TO CALL JESUS THE MESSIAH, BUT THE OTHERS REMINDED HIM THAT HE WAS ALSO THE ONE WHOM JESUS CALLED SATAN, FOR REFUSING TO ACCEPT JESUS' FORECAST OF HIS DEATH.

THAT WAS THE HEART OF THE PROBLEM, REALLY. THEY WERE ARGUING ABOUT WHO WAS THE GREATEST BECAUSE THEY COULD NOT STAND WHAT JESUS HAD SAID ABOUT BEING KILLED. THEY DID NOT UNDERSTAND AND THEY WERE AFRAID TO ASK, SO THEY GOT AS FAR AWAY FROM IT AS THEY COULD BY PLAYING STATUS GAMES INSTEAD. WHO IS FIRST, WHO IS BEST, WHO IS GREATEST.

YOU KNOW WHAT THAT IS LIKE. WHEN YOU ARE SCARED OF SOMETHING, DON'T ASK. ACT LIKE NOTHING IS WRONG. DON'T BRING IT UP. CHANGE THE SUBJECT AND TALK ABOUT SOMETHING ELSE INSTEAD, SOMETHING THAT MAKES YOU FEEL BETTER...BIG AND STRONG, IN CONTROL. THAT IS WHAT THE DISCIPLES WERE DOING, WHICH WAS WHY JESUS HAD TO SIT DOWN AND GIVE THEM A LEADERSHIP SEMINAR RIGHT THEN AND THERE!

TO THEIR CREDIT, THE DISCIPLES ARE NOT BAD GUYS; THEY'RE JUST VERY HUMAN. THEY'RE AMBITIOUS (NOTHING WRONG WITH THAT DEPENDING ON YOUR GOAL). THEY ARE DRIVEN, THEY ARE TASK-ORIENTED; THEY ARE ORGANIZED; THEY ARE PRODUCTIVE, FAITHFUL AND GOOD. THEIR PARENTS HAD TO BE SO PLEASED! THEY'RE JUST LIKE US..WE WORK VERY HARD TO BE GOOD, FAITHFUL AND SUCCESSFUL. WE TRY TO DO EVERYTHING RIGHT AND TO BE GOOD ENOUGH AT IT ALL. THE QUESTION FOR THE DISCIPLES IN JESUS'S TIME AND OUR OWN IS "WHY?" WHY DO ALL THOSE THINGS AND BE ALL THOSE THINGS? IS IT TO BE BETTER THAN OTHERS, OR TO MAKE GOOD, JUST, EVEN HOLY, THINGS FOR OTHERS? JESUS DECIDED THAT ALL OF US DISCIPLES NEED A NEW MODEL: SERVANTHOOD. SERVANT. THAT'S NOT WHAT THEY OR WE WANTED. THEY DIDN'T WANT TO WAIT ON OTHER PEOPLE, CLEAN UP AFTER THEM, HELP THEM IN ANY WAY. JESUS SAYS THAT THE GREATEST PERSON IS THE ONE WHO'S LAST, AT THE END OF THE LINE, SERVING EVERYONE ELSE.

"WHOEVER WANTS TO BE FIRST MUST BE LAST OF ALL AND SERVANTS OF ALL," HE TOLD THEM. THEN HE SHOWED THEM WHAT HE MEANT BY TAKING A LITTLE CHILD IN HIS ARMS. THEY WANTED TO KNOW WHO WAS GREATEST, SO HE SHOWED THEM: TWENTY-SIX INCHES TALL, LIMITED VOCABULARY, UNEMPLOYED, ZERO NET WORTH. GOD'S AGENT. THE LAST, THE LEAST OF ALL.

OUR HIERARCHIES ARE SO SUBTLE THAT HALF THE TIME WE ARE NOT EVEN AWARE OF THEM. A PASTOR SHARES THE FOLLOWING STORY: ONE SUNDAY I WAS STANDING OUTSIDE THE CHURCH AFTER THE 11 O'CLOCK SERVICE WHEN A MAN WITH A SOBBING CHILD ON HIS

SHOULDER CAME OUT RIGHT BEHIND HIS WIFE, WHO HELD A BEAMING CHILD BY THE HAND. "WHAT'S THE MATTER?" I ASKED HER AND SHE EXPLAINED. THEIR ELDEST SON—THE BEAMING ONE—HAD JUST ENTERED THIRD GRADE AND WAS GOING TO GET TO BE AN ACTOLYTE; LIGHTING THE CANDLES ON SUNDAY MORNINGS. INSIDE, THE HEAD USHER HAD BEEN SHOWING HIM THE ROPES...HOW TO LIGHT THE CANDLES, HOW TO CARRY THE LIGHTER, WHEN HIS LITTLE BROTHER HAD ANNOUNCED WITH STARS IN HIS EYES THAT HE WOULD LIKE TO BE AN ACTOLYTE TOO. FOR THE UMPTEENTH TIME IN HIS SHORT LIFE, HE WAS TOLD NO, THAT HE WAS TOO YOUNG, TOO SMALL AND IT SIMPLY UNDOID HIM. HE WAS NEVER FIRST, HIS MOTHER EXPLAINED. HE WAS ALWAYS LAST, AND THE PASTOR THOUGHT, "GOD HELP US, WE'RE DOING RIGHT HERE---MAKING SURE THE FIRST GO FIRST AND THE LAST STAY LAST."

I DON'T KNOW WHAT THE ANSWER IS. I'M NOT SURE HOW ONE OPERATES A CHURCH OR A BUSINESS OR A SOCIETY BY TURNING IT OVER TO THOSE WITH THE LEAST TO OFFER, BUT I DO KNOW THAT GOD'S VALUES ARE NOT OUR VALUES, AND THAT KNOWLEDGE ALONE MAY BE ENOUGH TO KEEP US HUMBLE. HOWEVER WE CHOOSE TO ORGANIZE OUR LIVES, WE HAVE THIS LITTLE CHILD TO REMIND US THAT GOD ORGANIZES THINGS OTHERWISE, AND THAT IF WE WANT TO WELCOME GOD INTO OUR LIVES THEN THERE IS NO ONE WHOM WE MAY SAFELY IGNORE. IN THE TOPSY-TURVY KINGDOM OF GOD, THE MOST UNLIKELY PEOPLE ARE MOST LIKELY AGENTS OF GOD---THE ONES WHO LIVE IN THE WORLD BELOW OUR KNEECAPS, THE ONES WHO ARE STUCK AT THE END OF THE LINE, THE ONES WHO ARE SOBBING ON SOMEONE'S SHOULDER BECAUSE THEY ARE ALWAYS, ALWAYS LAST.

IN GOD'S WORLD, THINGS ARE DIFFERENT. CHILDREN RUN THE UNITED NATIONS. SECOND BORN CHILDREN GET TO GO FIRST, WHILE SERVANTS SIT DOWN AT TABLES THEY USED TO POLISH AND THE GREATEST DISCIPLE IS THE ONE WHO WAITS ON THEM. IF YOU WANT TO ENTER THIS KINGDOM, THERE IS A WAY: GO FIND SOMEONE SOCIETY CLAIMS IS A NOBODY, PUT YOUR ARMS AROUND THEM AND SAY HELLO TO GOD.