Nu‘uanu Congregational Church

Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost

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BECOMING THE LEAST Mark 9:30–37

Jesus sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, “Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and the 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.” —Mk 9:35–36

In order to explore the implications of this story for our life together, we need to first understand what it meant in its original context. If we fail to do this, we may miss the impact the story might have upon us, and the way we are to conduct ourselves in the life of the church, and in the life of the world as well.

First of all, we need to pay attention to those twelve disciples of Jesus, and how they failed to understand what was beginning to take place at this turning point in the entire story. For the second time in the Gospel of Mark, Jesus tells them about his forthcoming fate: his betrayal and death, and only after these, his rising again. The disciples do not understand.

Instead, Jesus overhears them engaged in an argument as they were *on the way* to Capernaum. Once again, we have this phrase “on the way.” In Mark’s Gospel, discipleship occurs not beside the way, or beyond the way, but *on the way*. This is the story of a movement. The disciples, however, in the subject matter of their argument, betray both the movement and the call to discipleship, for they are arguing about who is the greatest. Jesus has just revealed to them his fate as one who will be put to death, and here they are, talking about being the greatest! Imagine that!

They then find themselves in the house in Capernaum, and it is at this point that Jesus cuts through the nonsense and counters their aspirations to human greatness and importance. He calls them together and says to them, “Whoever wants to be first must be last and the servant of all.” In the kingdom of God, there can be no self-elevation, no talk of who is the greatest, no hierarchical order in which some are more important than others. And to illustrate the point Jesus places a child in their midst 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.”

Conventional Christianity has sentimentalized this image of the child. What could be sweeter and more innocent and even more valuable than a child? Witness the current search for the missing child, Ariel Kalua, in Waimanalo. We value our children, but we need to remember that children were not so valued in 1st century Palestine and in subsequent centuries. Even in the Middle Ages, 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. In the time of Jesus, children were among the least valued. They, especially girl babies, could be discarded at will. Barbara Brown Taylor captures this attitude towards children when, in a sermon, she writes:

They wanted to know who was greatest, and so

he showed them: twenty-six inches tall, limited vocabulary, unemployed, zero net worth, nobody. The last, the least of all . . . if we want to welcome God into our lives then there is

no one we can safely ignore.

—“Last of All” from *Bread of Angels*

In 1st Century Palestine, children were not the only ones least valued. They were joined by the handicapped, the sick, the illiterate, those cast out as unclean, and also peasants, shepherds, widows, slaves, the unemployed, aliens, immigrants, prisoners, and the homeless. That’s quite a list, and we can immediately see how many of these same ones occupy the bottom places in our own society today.

And speaking of today and the life of our churches today, it does behoove us to consider who indeed are the “least” in our own society. The least are no longer children, but they are the immigrants and the prisoners and the homeless. Add to these the men and women who are gay, lesbian, and transgendered, and others you yourselves can name.

We need to consider who the “least” are in our society, for the implication of our story is this: there is no one whom we can safely ignore if we are to fulfill the demands of the Gospel and welcome God into our midst. There is no one we can exclude from our communities of faith if we are to be disciples *on the way.*

And yet, it is not all that easy. Let’s not fool ourselves. It may sound like a great idea to welcome everyone, even the least, into our midst. But welcoming, in light of the Gospel story, goes beyond a word we may extend to a Sunday visitor. Jesus is speaking not only of welcome, but also of acceptance and not only acceptance, but service as well.

To welcome someone is one thing. To accept “the least” is another, and to serve “the least” another still. First, there is this matter of acceptance. I think of the interplay between tolerance and acceptance. Tolerance is a value many hold in our society and in our churches for that matter, and it can be a good value. Religious tolerance is a good thing. The tolerance of differences in people is also a good thing. The tolerance of the person who is unacceptable to others is even a better thing. But acceptance pushes the envelope. I may tolerate another person’s religion, or sexual preference, or station in life, but to accept that same person means that I must embrace him or her for who he or she actually *is,* and forgo my feelings of superiority that may linger in me, or any desire to “elevate” him or her to my standard of belief or behavior.

If we are honest with ourselves, we will have to admit that Christian communities often practice tolerance in place of the acceptance Jesus in the story calls for. Take the conventional Christian instruction to “love the sinner but hate the sin.” This allows us to keep our prejudices as to what we consider to be a sin. Whether it be someone’s sexual orientation or laziness or addiction, we can find ourselves tolerating the person who exhibits these characteristics we may consider to be sinful, but at the same time fall so very short of accepting him or her for who he or she is and not for who we think he or she ought to be. Let us consider what is considered to be a “sin” is often culturally defined. What is a sin in one generation may not be a sin in another. There was a time when slavery was not viewed as a sin, but we surely view slavery as a sin in our day. This kind of understanding has led Douglas John Hall to say that we should not define Christianity as a “system of morality.” It would be far more faithful to view sin as separation rather than the breaking of a moral code. Sin is anything that separates us from God and neighbor.

And then there is this matter of service. “Whoever wants to be first must be least of all and the servant of all.” Jesus bids us not only to welcome the least, accept the least, but also to serve the least. To serve the least as they are and not as we want them to be. To serve them, not from a position of power or importance, not in a paternalistic fashion, but to serve them in a spirit of mutual acceptance and love, which will mean that we may find them serving us as well!

In order to serve others in the manner of Jesus, we ourselves are going to have to *become the least*. Otherwise, we will never be able to identify ourselves with those we are to called to serve. This is no easy matter. To become least, we are going to have to give up all power, all feelings of superiority, all claims to having the truth over against others, all desires to be first. May I say that to become least is not possible to do on our own? It is only by the grace of God that we can become least, that we can become as the little child in our story.

This practice of service, as envisioned in our story, depends upon us becoming least. And the practice of service does not belong to the few; it belongs to everyone. There is no one I can think of who has captured the egalitarian vision of service better than Martin Luther King Jr. in his sermon “The Drum Major Instinct.” Everyone, said Dr. King, wants to be the drum major rather than content to just play in the band. But this is not the way of the Gospel. Preached Dr. King:

And so Jesus gave us a new norm of greatness. If you want to be important—wonderful. If you want to be recognized— wonderful. But recognize that he who is greatest among you

shall be your servant. That’s a new definition of greatness. And this morning, the thing I like about it: by giving that definition of greatness, it means that everyone can be great, because everyone can serve. You don’t have to have a college degree to serve. You don’t have to make your subject and your verb agree to serve. You don’t have to know about Plato and Aristotle to serve. You don’t have to know about Einstein’s theory of relativity to serve. You don’t have to know the second theory of thermodynamics in physics in order to serve. You only need a heart full of grace, a soul generated by love. And you can be that servant.

May God help us so to do. Amen.