

Sermon 9/20/2015 Mark 9:30-37 James 3:13 – 4:3, 7-8a “Drawing Near”

It would be easy to be Christian and to be a Christian church, if we just didn't have to deal with other people! How many times I have said this, with feeling. For it is all too true. It is a challenge to be Christ-like when tensions are rising, pressures are high and tempers are short.

We should not be surprised. The first child ever born, says the Bible, killed his own brother out of jealousy, by premeditated murder as a result of worship, of all things, when it seemed that God was pleased with his brother's offering but not with his. (See Genesis 4)

Today's Gospel lesson offered another example of human faultiness. The disciples had been with Jesus, witnessing his healings, listening to his teachings, watching him feed the five thousand so miraculously. Last week Peter ended up confessing to Jesus that he believed him to be the Messiah. Immediately after, Jesus started talking about having to suffer and die, which shook Peter up profoundly. Jesus ended up telling the disciples that whoever would try to save his own life will lose it, and whoever loses life for the sake of another will save it.... (Jesus was basically telling them the secret of what life is really all about: he was explaining what it meant for HIM - Jesus - to be Messiah, that he would lay his own life down.)

After all that, what did the disciples do? They argued about who was best among them. Perhaps they did so because they heard Jesus' words about his death and figured that they'd better have a leader-in-training “in the wings.” But more likely, given their track record, they were simply caught up in competing with one another. Jesus was talking about the Cross while they were blindly groping around in their own ambitions. Maybe those disciples were not so different from us...

When Jesus spoke of being killed, the disciples didn't get it and didn't want to deal with it..So along the way to Capernaum, they argued among themselves about who of them was the greatest. When they arrived, Jesus asked them point-blank what they had been talking about.. They were silent. While Jesus was telling them to expect his betrayal and death, they were thinking about their place in the kingdom.

Knowing this, Jesus sat down, which was the way rabbis positioned themselves when they were doing serious teaching, called the twelve to gather round, and said to them, "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant (Greek: *diakonos*) 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." (9:35-37)

Stop for a minute! We love this image of Jesus, tenderly welcoming children, similar to the images we see on the news this week of Pope Francis showing concern and love for children. Here in this church we even have a stained glass window to show the beauty of it! But things were quite different in Jesus' day!

Jesus' gesture surely disturbed the disciples because, in that time and place, children had very little status -- ranking somewhere between a woman and a slave. Children spent their time in the care of women, and were not to interfere in men's affairs. For a rabbi to take a child in his arms in the presence of his disciples was unheard of -- an unusual and compelling gesture. "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me, but the one who sent me" (v. 37). The principle was that of a king's representative who was accorded the status of the king himself. Kings expected people to treat their emissaries with great respect, and the person who refused to do so insulted, not the emissary, but the king himself. In v. 37, Jesus linked the child to himself and himself to God.... The person who welcomes a powerless child gets credit for welcoming Jesus, and the person who welcomes Jesus gets credit for welcoming God.

The disciples were competing about their own status, so Jesus used a child, who had basically NO status. The child can be for us today a symbol for anyone who is in need, helpless, or of lowly status... By extension, we can understand that Jesus was calling us to welcome the homeless, the disabled, the mentally ill, the sick, the uneducated, perhaps refugees desperate for a place to welcome them, and anyone else who cannot repay our hospitality or make it "worth our while." With this teaching, Jesus does not abolish ambition, but redirects it. "For the ambition to have things done for us, (Jesus) substituted the ambition to do things for others" (Barclay, 229). (Some of the above from Richard Donovan, *Sermonwriter*, edited by fte)

The Christian church has been shaped by this passage. It has fed the hungry, housed the homeless, cared for orphans, provided medical care to the sick, taught people to read, and met many other basic needs. The church has loved the helpless and the hopeless. Even so, we who are the church need to be constantly reminded of Jesus' call to welcome "little ones." In years past the church became powerful, gaining lots of property and status. To this day many churches cultivate the favor of the wealthy and powerful in the hope that they will fund ministries or buy the pastors million-dollar jets. Too many times, churches have been tempted to pretty much ignore the unlovely, tempted to build large churches (with big parking lots!) in the suburbs and to ignore the inner city. If the original disciples needed to repent for arguing among themselves who was the greatest (v. 34), we who are Christian in 2015 also need to repent.

This week, as Pope Francis comes to the US to visit, I hope that all of us will listen to what he has to say to American churches. Though he is a Catholic, he seems to have heard very clearly Jesus' teachings about welcoming and caring for those who are low on power. (pause)

I have a friend who is a member of a church that is not Methodist in a Connecticut city. She reports that though attendance is around 25 on a Sunday, that the church supports a full-time minister and a professional choir because it has something like an \$8,000,000 endowment. They keep their building up nicely, pay their pastor a HUGE salary, and support a few missions, but most of their income is spent on themselves. I listen to my friend complain about the minister and others in the congregation and I wonder, "Is this at all what Jesus had in mind when he taught his disciples?"

Then I look at our own situation, a huge energy-devouring building with little parking and lots of steps but also a lot of beauty and a small congregation with huge hearts and little money but the desire to use what you have to stay here to feed the hungry and house AA meetings and study the Bible and welcome anybody who comes through the door, and I can ask the same question, “Is this at all what Jesus had in mind when he taught his disciples?” And in a lot of ways, it seems to me that what we have here must come closer to what Jesus was talking about. Though our hearts and minds still need to draw nearer to the heart and mind of our Lord!

Years ago a woman told of how her life had become what felt like a dead end, that it had no meaning or purpose or direction, that nothing fulfilled her or filled her with enthusiasm. She thought about who in the world had found something meaningful in their lives, who she would want to be like if she were able to. And she decided that Mother Theresa would be her role model—here was a woman who had dedicated her life to caring for a group of people who were poor and homeless, family-less, people who die on the streets—she takes them in and gives them a comfortable place to spend their last days on earth. Here was someone who had found out what life is all about, here was someone she wanted to share events with. As a matter of fact, she decided that she would go to Calcutta where Mother Theresa had her convent. So she wrote to Mother Theresa and explained how her life was meaningless and that she wanted to go to Calcutta to work with her. A long time passed, but finally she received a return letter from India, handwritten by Mother Theresa. She opened it and found only one sentence, “You must find your own Calcutta.” (Source uncertain)

For all of us, it’s one thing to be part of a church, to come to worship and read the Bible and perhaps even to attend a Bible study. You may give a healthy percentage of your money to the church and feel good about it. You may attend almost every Sunday. But there’s something else about following Jesus that is harder than these things, and that is drawing so near to God (by prayer and just being still before God) that we become more and more able to notice and then put ourselves out for “the least.”

A man who lived near the parsonage in Southington when I was pastor there would barge into my day on a daily basis, wanting desperately to be treated nicely. He loved to help out, but he could really get under your skin by telling you everything you’re doing wrong. He had real limitations, having been brain-damaged by an illness at the age of three. Sometimes it was really challenging to deal with him. When someone would yell at him, he would respond with a loud yell. He knew how folks felt about him, that most people did not want him around, and that some would not even tell him “hello” when he greeted them. Sometimes people - even church members! - would tell him to get lost. He was one who was truly “least,” and he painfully knew this.

So what does a follower of Jesus do? The way to draw near to Jesus is to look at such a person with eyes that see his struggle, that notice how much he needs a place where he can be accepted and affirmed while at the same time spelling out for him clear boundaries so that a relationship is possible. The time you give such a person, just by being decent to him when you might have ignored him, even when you feel like yelling at him, is time you give to your Lord.

Those disciples didn't catch on to this for a long time, understandable since it goes against our natural tendencies. Human beings want our own free time and nobody to put big demands on us. We don't like it when somebody makes us feel uncomfortable or threatened. But Jesus Christ calls us to something higher and bigger than our comfort. He calls us to what we might call "cross purposes," where we go against what we might naturally choose to do and do something uncomfortable *because* of his call. If we are not wrestling with these things, we need to listen more deeply with our hearts, because if we are not struggling, we are almost surely not walking through our lives as serious followers of Christ.

Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me." (9:35-37) Even here in Winsted, may we each find our own Calcutta.

Thank God we do not have to sort this out on our own! We can ask God for help. When we do, God's Holy Spirit opens our eyes and hearts to God's nudges and to the way of Jesus.

In this church, in our lives, may God help us to draw near to the ways of Christ Jesus, that our lives may give hope to all people, especially those who are "the least" among us. Amen.