

Sermon Preached September 20, 2009
Year B, Proper 20
St. Paul's Episcopal Church
North Andover, Massachusetts
The Rev. Stephanie Chase Wilson

You know, my kids are easy to love. Not that I'm biased or anything, but they are a blessing. For instance, Emma just learned to tie her shoes this week and she is utterly delighted with this accomplishment. She tells everyone about it, followed up by a demonstration. Her smiles are wide and her joy is infectious. She's a pleasure to be around. In fact, it's a relief in this world of endless consumerism, to be with someone who finds fulfillment in such simple things. So when in the gospel of Mark, Jesus takes a small child in his arms 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," I find this an easy task to do. Who wouldn't want to welcome a child? Kids are great! Is Jesus is saying let's just be nice to children and we're good to go for the Kingdom?

The passage begins with Jesus giving the second of three warnings about his death. He is quietly and privately teaching his disciples that he will die and rise again. This confuses the disciples. It makes no sense to them. They don't even bother rebuking him as Peter did the first time Jesus foretold his death. They are afraid to ask him.

Their confusion and complete lack of understanding is further underscored by what happens next. When they arrive in Capernaum, Jesus discovers that on the way they had been arguing about who is the greatest. Who is the greatest?! They've just been told Jesus will be killed, and they want to know whose is the greatest? You'd think they'd be more interested in asking, "where are you going to run to when Jesus is betrayed?"

You can almost image Jesus shaking his head, giving a big sigh, looking up to heaven and muttering, "why did you give me these guys?" Instead Jesus patiently does two things. First he says, "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all." In other words, he doesn't chastise them about not "getting it" about the death and resurrection. He also doesn't chastise them about wanting to be greatest. He seems to assume that of course everyone wants to be the greatest. What he does do is completely reinterpret what "being the greatest" means. He turns it on its head.

The second thing Jesus does is take the child and make the statement about welcoming children. Since kids are so loved and lovable, it isn't immediately clear what welcoming children has to do with the "first being last." But it does make sense when you consider how children were viewed in the ancient world. Remember, Jesus is speaking in Aramaic and in that language he is using a play on the word *talya*. In Aramaic, this word can be interpreted as

either *servant* or *child*. In other words, children had a status no greater than a servant. This view holds for centuries. Even “the medieval Mediterranean theologian 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. When a famine came upon the land, children would be fed last, after the adults.”¹

Given this understanding of children, the child in their midst becomes a very potent object lesson. Jesus takes the lowliest person he can find, the one with no power or status and in effect says, “to be the greatest you have to put this child, and all other powerless people, first; while you go last. In fact, you must be the servant of all people, no matter who they are. Only then will you be the greatest.”

There are three points that Jesus is trying to address with his words today. The first is that putting yourself first causes discrimination and discord. The book of James talks about this quite succinctly when he says, “For where there is envy and selfish ambition, there will also be disorder and wickedness of every kind.” And further writes, “Those conflicts and disputes among you, where do they come from?”

¹ *John J. Pilch of Georgetown University*, Copyright © 1996 by The Order of St. Benedict, Inc., Collegeville, Minnesota. , http://liturgy.slu.edu/25OrdB092406/theword_cultural.html, 9/20/06

Do they not come from your cravings that are at war within you?” Desiring more and more, envying others, wanting things only for self is a recipe for conflict. The disciples illustrated this well on the road to Capernaum. They each wanted to be the greatest, each had selfish ambition, and it caused arguing.

The second point, and corollary of the first, is that if envy and cravings cause discord, a giving up of those things causes peace. Once you give up cravings and envy, allowing others to go first, you will be at peace with others and within yourself.

Have you ever watched an impatient driver in heavy traffic? He is desperate to get ahead, honking his horn, weaving in and out of traffic, cursing and yelling. He wants what he wants right now and will burst a blood vessel to get it. He doesn't care who he cuts off in the process. If instead he were to let go of his craving to get ahead, happily letting others go first, he would still get to where he is going, but be at peace and probably a lot happier.

The third point Jesus makes with his statement is that being a servant isn't about performing a string of good deeds, it's a way of looking at yourself and others. It's a way of life. Jesus says we must welcome the little child. To welcome someone is another way of extending hospitality.

We are to look at everyone in the world as our guest to treat with respect and concern, even the most powerless, especially the most powerless. If every Saturday we are off at the soup kitchen helping the poor, it ultimately doesn't mean anything if we see ourselves as better than them, holier, or closer to God than they are. If we see ourselves as the greatest, it doesn't matter if we do something nice for them now and then, we are judging them, creating conflict within them and between us. As Paul says in 1 Corinthians [13:3] "If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing." The answer to discord is humility and hospitality as a way of life, not an occasional action. We must look that homeless person in the eye, see Jesus, love him for it, and then act on that love.

It also means we must extend compassion and humility to those around us we don't care for very much. The boring neighbor, the boastful co-worker, the thick-headed boss, the nagging spouse, the arrogant store clerk, -- these people too are created by God. When Christ said servant of "all," he meant all. We are to welcome even the difficult people and see Jesus in them.

To be last and servant of all means giving up envy and selfish ambition in order to create peace between ourselves and others, as well as peace within ourselves. It is a way of life where we extend hospitality and humility to all, no matter who they are.

The irony of what Jesus says to the disciples is that while he is addressing their concerns about being the greatest, he is simultaneously addressing his very first comment – that he would die and be raised after 3 days. Because, of course, Jesus is the perfect example of what it means to be the greatest. He died so that all of us who are powerless over sin and death have new life in him. As Mark says later, “the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many” [Mk 10:45]. Jesus allowed himself to be servant of all, saving us, and paradoxically becoming the greatest of all. We too can be great by serving all and seeing Jesus in them.

Once upon a time there was once an old stone monastery tucked away in the middle of a picturesque forest. For many years people would make the significant detour required to seek out this monastery. The peaceful spirit of the place was healing for the soul.

In recent years however fewer and fewer people were making their way to the monastery. The monks had grown jealous and petty in their relationships with one another, and the animosity was felt by those who visited. The Abbot of the monastery was distressed by what was happening, and poured out his heart to his good friend Jeremiah, who was a wise old Jewish rabbi. Having heard the Abbot's tale of woe he asked if he could offer a suggestion. “Please do” replied the Abbot. “Anything you can offer.”

Jeremiah said that he had received a vision, an important vision, and the vision was this: the messiah was among the ranks of the monks. The Abbot was flabbergasted. One among his own was the Messiah! Who could it be? He knew it wasn't himself, but who? He raced back to the monastery and shared his exciting news with his fellow monks. The monks grew silent as they looked into each other's faces. Was this one the Messiah?

From that day on the mood in the monastery changed. Joseph and Ivan started talking again, neither wanting to be guilty of slighting the Messiah. Pierre and Naibu left behind their frosty anger and sought out each other's forgiveness. The monks began serving each other, looking out for opportunities to assist, seeking healing and forgiveness where offence had been given.

As one traveler, then another, found their way to the monastery, word soon spread about the remarkable spirit of the place. People once again took the journey to the monastery and found themselves renewed and transformed. All because those monks knew the Messiah was among them.²

Amen.

² Source: Rewritten by Scott Higgins from an unknown source.