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The Church We are Called to Be
Greenland Hills United Methodist Church

Mark 9:30-37

New Revised Standard Version

They went on from there and passed through Galilee. He did not want anyone to know it; for he was teaching his disciples, saying to them, "The Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him, and three days after being killed, he will rise again." But they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him. Then they came to Capernaum; and when he was in the house he asked them, "What were you arguing about on the way?" But they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another who was the greatest. He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and 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."

The church we are called to be. Last week we talked about how we are called to be a church where we can work together toward the common good, working for the good of all, respecting the rights and responsibilities of all people. Living a sacrificial life so that others can get what they need. Church gives us the grounding to be that person. We know that the way we behave towards one another is the fullest expression of what we believe.

This week I invite us to think about how the church we are called to be upends everything we think we know about the way the world works. One of the things I love about the Bible and the stories of Jesus is that the disciples don't get it, which makes me feel better when I don't get it either. Jesus will share that he is going to be betrayed, suffer, and be killed, then in three days be raised. The disciples stop listening after the "be killed" part because that outcome did not fit with their plans. The disciples didn't understand what Jesus was saying, they were afraid to ask him, so then they start arguing about who is the greatest. It's like when you upset a parent and then argue with your sibling about which sibling is loved more. My favorite story about having a favorite child is when Clyde Thompson shared when his two sons would ask him if he had a favorite he would say yes, but that it changes day to day.

There is something so disruptive, unexpected, and crazy about what Jesus is saying and predicting that the more Jesus talks about his death, the more confused people get. Jesus was going to actively choose to not return evil for evil; to actively choose to not use violence against violence; to actively choose to refuse using hate to battle hate. This is the way of the cross.

Jesus is talking about the suffering and death he was going to undergo in order to show the world the depth of God's love, and his disciples react to his teaching by arguing about greatness and what that meant and how they were going to outdo each other and climb to the top of the discipleship heap. We don't understand how Jesus wants us to re-imagine the world. We think if you work hard, you are rewarded. We think if you get straight A's, you are loved more. We think if the world sees you as the best, then that is how God works too.

Jesus teaches us over and over again that people without any status are the most important, like children that you can't get anything from in terms of honor or status in the world. Jesus upends our value systems of how the world works. Jesus' world was obsessed with social status. I mean the disciples are fighting over who is top in the pecking order, and then Jesus takes a little child. Children in Jesus' day were completely powerless, vulnerable, socially insignificant. Children were far down the social ladder behind women, the poor, the sick and the lame. The word in Greek for little child has a double meaning. It can mean immediate offspring, but it can also mean slave or servant.¹

¹ <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revise-common-lectionary/ordinary-25-2/commentary-on-mark-930-37-7>

All of these assumptions that we make, Jesus turns them inside out. In the story right before this one Jesus tells his disciples, “For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it” (Mark 8:35). That makes me think of the common good. I will have to sacrifice for the wellbeing of all people. My life isn’t all about me. Assumption number one turned inside out.

Following Jesus as a disciple means that we take last place, as a servant. Assumption number two turned inside out. All the values of the world are turned upside down on their head, shaken up, and reshaped into a mind-blowing idea. Whoever wants to be first must be a servant, and thus welcome a child. Whoever welcomes the child welcomes Jesus and thus welcomes God. We are asked to open up the doors wide as wide as can be and inviting God to be at home.

It is this top-to-bottom reversal of rank. When we welcome someone that we think is beneath us, we are welcoming Jesus, and the one who sent Jesus. Very early on Jesus was eating with some people that were considered sinners and tax collectors. Jesus said, “The healthy have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I came to call, not the virtuous, but sinners” (Mark 2:17).² We know that the church we are called to be is inclusive of all people, Christians and questioning skeptics, believers and agnostics, women and men, those of all sexual orientations and gender identities, those of all classes and abilities. And yet, we put people into boxes and think that this person isn’t a good fit for *my* church. When we celebrate Communion we remember that this table from which we eat and drink isn’t mine or yours. We don’t get to decide who is in and who is out. This table is Jesus’ and he says everyone who is hungry is invited.

Author Rachel Held Evans put it this way, “The church is God saying, ‘I’m throwing a banquet, and all these mismatched, messed-up people are invited. Here, have some wine.’”³ Another wonderful line from Rachel Held Evans reminds me that God wins. She says, “The folks you’re shutting out of the church today will be leading it tomorrow. That’s how the Spirit works. The future’s in the margins.”⁴ The world turned upside down.

The last shall be first, the first shall be last. This is the gospel, the good news for all people. This is the way that God works. Many people in the world are always trying to get on the escalator to ride it up. Being a follower of Jesus doesn’t give you power or security or success because Jesus is always getting on the escalator to ride it down. We are so focused on climbing the ladder of success while Jesus is focused on descending the ladder of service.

You want to be great? Serve anyone and everyone in sight. People who push to the front of the line will find themselves at the end. People who hope to see the front will suddenly be first in line. You want to be great? Embrace someone who has no power, no status, no measure of success, no way to repay the kindness. We are called to be a church where we measure greatness by how much we share with others, how much we take care of others, how much we love others, how much we serve others.

What kind of world would we live in if that were our understanding of what it meant to be great? What if people were regularly trying to out-do each other in their deeds of kindness and service? What if there were competitions on TV to see who was willing to be last so that others could go first? If there were reality TV shows that followed people around as they tried to help as many people as possible? What kind of world would we live in if those things happened?⁵

² <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-25-2/commentary-on-mark-930-37-7>

³ Rachel Held Evans, [Searching for Sunday: Loving, Leaving, and Finding the Church](#)

⁴ <https://twitter.com/rachelheldevans/status/884495611524939778?lang=en>

⁵ <http://www.davidlose.net/2018/09/pentecost-18-b-a-different-kind-of-greatness/>

What makes a great church is vulnerable service. Greenland Hills is not the biggest church around, but we are a church that is willing to risk status to be more reflective of all the diversity in God's beloved community. We have lots of children running around at our church. Having kids running up and down the hallways is a problem that many churches would be eager to have. We are called to be a church that seeks out the people who are way too easily overlooked and usually unheard. Those are the people we serve, we embrace, and we welcome.

When we take everything we think we know about winning and greatness, who is deserving and who is not, who are the powerful and who are the weak, when we take all of that worldly knowledge and we turn that knowledge upside down—or better yet, throw it out the window—then Jesus might say we are finally getting it a little bit. We are called to be a church that sees those who would never be considered winners, those who are brushed aside and seen as disposable, and then to serve them. When we do that it shapes us more into God's image.

It makes me think of Susan. Susan was a member of the church but she hadn't been in years. David had volunteered to check up on people who hadn't been to church in a while so he went to Susan's house. The shrubbery was overgrown and you couldn't see in the windows. David knocked and told Susan he was from the church. She said she didn't go to that church, and he said she was still a part of the church family. She closed the door on him, but David had noticed Susan was wearing a coat inside her house. David went home and as he drove into the garage he saw a space heater that he used when he was tinkering in the garage. The next day he took the space heater to Susan's house. She took it, and asked David how you turned it on. David was invited inside and he realized that Susan was a hermit. The next week he brought her a bag of groceries, the next week he trimmed her shrubbery. He didn't mean to keep showing up at her house but he kept ending up there. He would be taking his dishes to the sink and wonder if Susan had eaten dinner. He kept stopping by. A few years later Susan died and in her simple will she left her savings account of \$2800 to the church. She wrote, "I want the church to have this because when everyone else left me alone, that man from the church kept coming by." What we do in our lives outside of this place makes a difference. Every time you embrace the least of these, you embrace me, and not just me but the one who sent me. Thanks be to God, Amen.