

19 September 2021: Mark 9:30-37 (Proper 20)

There are no ‘stained-glass saints’ in the Bible: today’s Gospel proves it. For the second time Jesus tells the Disciples he will be betrayed, killed, and rise again. The words are nearly identical to last week’s Gospel. It is no wonder the Disciples do not understand. Most First Century Jews believed a Messiah would come, but nobody thought the Messiah would be executed by the Romans. About 30 years before, in response to the census of Quirinius mentioned in Luke’s Gospel, history tells us a rebellion was led by one, Judas the Galilean. He failed: his forces defeated, he was captured and crucified, and his movement died with him. The Disciples’ response to Jesus’ words is reasonable: *they did not understand...were afraid to ask him* (v 32). How could betrayal and death befall the true Messiah?

Part of their muddle involved what they had been talking about on their 30-mile journey from Caesarea Philippi to Galilee. Their dispute is not flattering. Jesus asks what they were *arguing about* (v 33). Note: they did not have a discussion or conversation but an argument. I wonder if the argument was 30 miles long? They do not respond to his question because, *they had argued with one another who was greatest* (v 34).

How amazing is Jesus’ patience and gentleness—he intends no embarrassment or shame. Away from the crowds he confronts them. What he said must have dumbfounded them even more: *Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all* (v 35). Then he took a little child in his arms (v 36) and said, *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).

Here Jesus does not say *become* like little children but *welcome* a little child. Elsewhere (Matthew 18:2ff; Mark 10:15; Luke 18:17), Jesus does say ‘become like a child,’ but not here. Welcome the little child, says Jesus, and you welcome me and the Father too.

Before getting all sentimental about supposed childhood innocence keep this in mind: in the ancient world parents had affection for their children but it was affection tempered by the hard reality of high childhood mortality, and the hard experience of taking care of families in a country occupied by a foreign, oppressive regime. While children were loved, they were also an economic burden until they could contribute their labor to the family well-being. The fact is, for most of human history children have had no social standing or ‘rights.’ Children were powerless, expendable, a source of cheap labor.

In embracing an anonymous child and making her the object lesson of true discipleship, Jesus is not creating a sappy tableau to pluck at the heart strings. He is providing the Disciples with a vivid, unexpected example of the radically humble service implicit in being His follower. Jesus’ Disciples are to serve the lowliest, seeing Christ in them, serving those who cannot serve themselves as one would serve Christ, knowing fulfillment in reaching out to the most powerless among us, protecting the disenfranchised, the expendable, the disposable. This, says Jesus, defines greatness in God’s Kingdom.

This is how God comes to all humanity. God the Son in ecstatic love and mercy bursts forth from heavenly glory to unite himself with fallen humanity, becoming one of us to unite us to Himself and lift all humanity to the Father. Jesus’ purpose is to bring everyone to divine intimacy. We are rebellious, worthless sinners yet God treasures us and with longing love obliterates all blame.

If we love Jesus, we will become like Him, yearn to be more like him, to serve the throwaway, the powerless, the unwanted—in the world’s estimation—to be Christ to them. We will not worry about ‘greatness,’ but will think, speak, and practice loving-kind mercy. We will want to love Jesus always more, through our compassion in service to others because Jesus treasures them. And whatever Jesus treasures, we treasure too, and serve, for his sake.

What would the Church, what would we look like if we grew more in serving one another, in serving others as Christ, especially the lowliest? What would our community look like if we became ever more intent on the actions of love in Christ’s Name? We cannot know unless we live God’s will *on earth as it is in heaven*. Whoever welcomes and serves the powerless, hungry, homeless, destitute, wounded, hurting, imprisoned, and bereaved; whoever welcomes the forgotten, marginalized, and throwaway; *Whoever welcomes one such child in my Name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the One who sent me*.

Blessing and honor, thanksgiving and praise, more than we can offer, more than we can conceive, be yours, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, by all angels, all mortals, all creatures, now and for ever. Amen.