

Sermon by Rev. Dr. Michael J. Hoyt  
Glenshaw Presbyterian Church  
25<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time  
September 21, 2003

**“Waiting Tables and Welcoming Children”**  
**Mark 9:30-37**

It wasn't long ago that when I heard these stories from the gospels  
about Jesus welcoming the children,  
I imagined docile, quiet, reverent children sitting in his lap.  
That was before I had kids.  
Now that image has been abandoned and replaced with another one.

Our daughter Langley has always been a verbal child.  
At home it often seems that talking and being heard are her favorite pastimes.  
When James came along, Langley became even more verbal, and she got louder!  
Whether to keep Mommy's and Daddy's attention, or to impress her little brother,  
or to let him know who's boss,  
the volume went up considerably once there were two.  
And, over the past three years, James has learned a thing or two about talking,  
and can also be loud, when necessary.  
So when the two of them get going in unison, and in competition,  
it is anything but docile, quiet, and reverent.

So, if it had been a house on Scott Avenue, instead of Capernaum,  
where Jesus sat down with his disciples,  
I have a feeling that his teaching would have been interrupted more than once  
by a story about what happened at 1<sup>st</sup> grade recess, or art, or music,  
or at pre-school story time,  
or by a request to read the latest library book  
about horses or Thomas the Tank Engine.

Children often have a way of de-focussing our grown-up concerns.  
When grown-ups become too absorbed in our own serious affairs  
the act of welcoming children, making room for children,  
requires us to be a little less self-focussed.  
Children are needful and dependent, and they demand of their care-takers  
a certain level of self-denial.

Perhaps that's why, when the disciples are caught up in an argument  
about who among them is the greatest  
Jesus takes a child in his arms and says to his disciples,  
*Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me,  
and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.*

The occasion for Jesus to speak these words of wisdom

is one which sounds a little familiar.  
Once again, Jesus is predicting his own destruction;  
and the disciples have no clue what to do with this information,  
or what to say to Jesus, or even how to act or look when he talks about 'IT';  
'IT' being his death and resurrection.

No wonder Jesus feels the need to repeat himself,  
considering the dumbfounded response he gets when he brings up the subject.  
This is the second time, and there will soon be a third, when Jesus says 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, Mark tells us, *they did not understand what he was saying  
and were afraid to ask him.*

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So it is on the way to Capernaum,  
that the disciples, having failed to understand Jesus,  
move even further from his teaching  
in this conversation about who is the greatest.  
Some who read this passage  
would suggest that the disciples are engaging in more than mere  
chest-beating or macho talk.  
More likely, the disciples have decided that something must be done  
to save their movement from a Messiah who is bent on self-destruction.  
If things turn out as Jesus is predicting,  
someone had better step forward to keep the momentum going.  
But who should this new leader be?  
Who has the qualifications to take over when Jesus is gone?

William Willimon sees in this scene a "classic management strategy.  
When a CEO's focus gets side-tracked and the company begins to fall in earnings,  
new leadership is brought in.  
For a while, the company can sustain keeping on a weakened leader,  
especially if [that leader] is the founder of the company.  
But, eventually, [the leader] must be let go  
so that the firm can survive in the brutal marketplace.  
Clearly, there is no wisdom  
in following the founder on a path of self destruction."<sup>i</sup>

But Jesus shows no signs of retreating from his position.  
He calls the disciples on the carpet:  
*What were you arguing about on the way?*  
When he gets no answer

(because they have no answer that they can bear to tell him to his face),  
he speaks once again from his reservoir of strange wisdom:  
*Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.*

Let's admit it: this makes so little sense in our world.  
If you will permit an illustration from presidential politics two weeks in a row...  
Wesley Clark, recently announced his intention to run for the Democratic nomination.  
Clark is the former Supreme Commander of the Allied Forces  
    who conducted the bombing campaign against Slobodon Milosevich.  
As soon as he announced his candidacy, the usual thing happened:  
    his detractors began to criticize him.  
But I was intrigued by one of the criticisms leveled against him:  
    that he was known to be one who always put his own career advancement  
        as a top priority.  
And I wondered is that not the way of political advancement in the world?  
Is there a leader at the top of any nation, any corporation, any sports franchise,  
    who has made it to the top *without* an intense focus  
        on his or her own advancement?  
We can at least be sure  
    you don't get there by striving to be "last of all and servant of all."

Jesus' teaching stands in shocking contrast to the way of our world.  
The word in the Greek which we translate 'servant'  
    actually refers to 'one who waits on tables.'  
    That is, a waiter or a waitress.  
    "*Whoever wants to be first must be last of all  
        and the servant – the waiter or waitress – of all.*"  
Not exactly what the disciples had in mind!  
"Hello, my name is Peter, and I'll be your server tonight"  
    are not words that inspire visions of grandeur.  
But Jesus defines greatness in the humble term of servant-hood,  
    like the service of one who waits on tables,  
    and, we should add, without any expectation of receiving a tip.

In the Presbyterian tradition of church government,  
    this image of the servant  
        serves as the model for all great leadership in the church.  
The Presbyterian understanding is that those who hold office in the church –  
    ministers, elders, and deacons –  
    are called to follow the pattern of the one who came  
        "not to be served but to serve." (Mt. 20:28)  
Presbyterians do not ordain men and women to a greater *status*  
    among their brothers and sisters,  
but to a certain *function* within the body of Christ: the function of a servant.  
Given this understanding,  
    one of the most distinctive acts of the elder in the Presbyterian tradition

is that of serving the elements of communion to those who sit  
at the table of our Lord.

They literally 'wait the church's table'  
and thus follow the pattern Jesus set  
for leadership.

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Then, to drive home the point,  
Jesus takes a child in his arms and says,  
*Welcome a child in my name, and you welcome me;  
and not only me, but the One who sent me.*

At first this may just sound kind of sweet,  
until we remember that in the ancient world,  
children we not considered to be of much value or use  
until they reached a certain age.  
Until they became old enough to be productive members of the household,  
children held about the same status as, well, a servant.  
Perhaps even less status,  
since at least a servant contributed to the functioning of the household.

[So, Jesus profoundly redefines the meaning of greatness,  
and the means of participation in the kingdom of God.  
Greatness in the kingdom of God has to do with humble, self-giving deeds  
like waiting tables and welcoming children.]?

If the role of the servant is signified by the church leader who serves the Lord's Supper,  
then what better way to welcome children than in the sacrament of Baptism.

In Baptism, we all participate in Jesus' radical redefinition of greatness.  
In every Baptism – whether of infants, children or adults –  
we admit our sheer dependence on God's grace.  
In Baptism, we remember  
that life in the Kingdom of God is pure gift.  
Like helpless, dependent children,  
we can only receive life from God as a gift.

Next week in worship we will be receiving new members.  
One of those who will be received – Steve Tomkins – will be baptized.  
We will welcome Steve into a community that will teach him to aspire to the "greatness"  
of waiting tables and welcoming children.  
Steve will begin to learn – along with the rest of us – to measure by a different standard.  
In today's society, waiters and, say, school teachers  
do not command the big 6-figure salaries.  
They are not very powerful positions in terms of wealth or prestige.

Even in the church, there is not much glory in setting tables for a fellowship meal,  
or in washing dishes afterwards, or keeping the nursery on Sunday morning.  
But Jesus says that it is in quiet, humble service,  
and in attending to the child-like ones, the weak ones, of our society,  
that the greatness of the kingdom of God is revealed.

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In the end, Jesus is calling us to put aside all aspiration to any kind of greatness,  
even our aspirations to be greatly humble for Christ.  
Jesus ends this conversation by opening the door – not to status or achievement –  
but to relationship,  
with him, and with the One who sent him.

Lest our waiting and welcoming become a new mark of status,  
by which we measure ourselves against other Christian aspirants,  
by which we seek to earn our way to the *back* of the line, in order to be first,  
Jesus places the final emphasis  
on our openness to God, our relationship with God.

We do not serve others, or attend to the needs of the weak,  
in order to achieve something, or earn something, or distinguish ourselves,  
but because it is the way into the presence of God,  
which, of course, is what the sacraments are finally about:  
to be in the presence of God  
where we can be thankful that the greatness, and the goodness, of God  
is all that we really need.

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<sup>i</sup> William H. Willimon, *Pulpit Resource*, Vol. 31, No. 3. p. 51.