

“Strengthened for Service.”

A Sermon Shared with the Congregation of St. Andrew’s United Church
on the 18th Sunday after Pentecost, September 23, 2018

Scripture Reading: Mark 9:30-37

(by F. Moffatt)

Theme sentence: we are called to accept that Jesus the Messiah is a king who serves and we are strengthened to serve all, especially the least, by following his example.

Many years ago, on the day after Christmas, and not wanting to brave Highway 69 whiteouts on a trip to my parents’ place in Southern Ontario, I had purchased bus tickets for me and my small children, age 2 and 3. There is only one seat on a bus where 3 can sit together—the back seat beside the bathroom—and I had carefully come early and jockeyed for position so that the three of us could hustle to the back and sit together. Shortly before the bus was to depart, it was announced that the brakes had frozen in the minus 40 weather and the whole bus had to file out and into another bus. Now instead of having first pick of seats, we were last on, and my toddlers and I were in 3 different seats. Control freak that I am, I was annoyed, a bit worried too, but mostly angry at having my plans interfered with.

Another story, more serious. A writer for World Vision was in rural Niger, collecting stories for a fundraising article. She met with Mariama Idi, who called her “sister” as they were both 30ish. Mariama was hard at work grinding millet, and asked several times if Jocelyn Bell, the writer, could buy her community a grinding machine (\$500-1000). That was not Jocelyn’s mandate so she repeatedly said no. As the writer left, the woman handed her a few coins and said “so you can buy milk.” Of course, Jocelyn was dreadfully embarrassed, and the driver explained, “She thinks you are too skinny.” Jocelyn’s reflection: “Though we called each other ‘sister,’ we never actually stood on equal ground. As the first world sister, I had all the advantages of wealth, health, education, and opportunity. But with one deft gesture, she grabbed my hand and swiftly ushered me to the back of the line.”

So I think I understand a little of the disciple’s dismay, confusion, reluctance to accept the upside down hospitality and paradoxical kind of life that Jesus emphasizes and embodies.

The disciples are very uncomfortable. To give a bit of the context here, just recently, at the time of the Transfiguration, they have been reprimanded for trying to build Jesus a “tent”, close him up in a box. Then they have been irked and humiliated at not being able to cure a boy who was possessed.

Now, perhaps, they, like many of the Jews, were waiting for a king to come in triumph. But here is the Son of God saying that he will be handed over into human hands, be crucified, and after that be resurrected. No doubt they resist this vulnerability in Jesus. Their silence about that may represent fear or ignorance or disappointment.

Then they are silent once more when Jesus says, what were you talking about? Like guilty kids, they don’t speak. They had been arguing about who was the greatest and of course Jesus knows even though they don’t admit it.

Now this is something we should understand really well...much of our culture is based on competition and ranking. Competition for power, wealth, and prestige infected all of the cultures included in the Roman Empire as it does in the cultures of our world. Elections, award shows, reality shows...all about one-up-manship. We're not exactly like the Roman Empire but we seek status through cars, clothes, houses, titles, electronics. And actions that we take every day MAY have ramifications on "the least" that we might never consider. Competition is the way of our schools, workplace, some recreation. Maybe even churches are not free from this...I noticed that the cartoon posted on your Facebook page pictured a character boasting about how he could be more humble than another! We definitely want to be first. Or at least not last.

Jesus says, "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all" **and places the child in the centre**, as in a place of honour. "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me."

Now sometimes we "domesticate" Jesus and see him being kind and hugging children...the epitome of kindness! How cute! [The photo here "Jesus Mafa" I like, but it may more properly fit Mark 10 when people are shooing children away.]

NOT CUTE.

What Jesus has said to them is radical. It is a turning upside down of society. Life in the Roman Empire was very hierarchical. There was a small elite class that was very powerful and enjoyed much privilege. There was no middle class. And there was a huge underclass of people who had very little status or rights.

At the bottom of the hierarchy in Roman Empire would be servants and women. They were considered property and had few rights, but they were of some economic value. A child, on the other hand, was even lower, and until he or she could be put to work was just a mouth to feed, and being entirely without status.

So when Jesus puts the child in the middle it is far more than a tender gesture. He really is turning the world upside down.

Now about that child...there are several different ways we can look at it [I wonder about that...Jesus and the disciples are in a house, not a public place. Who is this child who is hanging around 13 strange men? Where are the parents? Or is this a street child?]

- is JC emphasizing helplessness and dependence?
- Is he focusing on humility?
- Is he focusing on wonder (childlike)
- or lowly social status?
- or the relation of child to parent? (Jesus' relation to God, Abba)

However it works, the child allows **God to be known as one who overturns social hierarchies.**

- Then and now, children are the first and worst victims of war, famine, disaster, economic turmoil. They pay with their health, their future, their lives.

- “orphans and widows” in Hebrew and Christian Scripture is “code” for the most needy + desperate that society MUST help
- marginal, on the outside, JC brings into the circle, not just of inclusion but of honour
- giving the place of honour to someone from whom you can gain no advantage (no networking, no influence, no patronage, no photo op or great publicity)
- more importantly: “if you welcome such a child, you welcome me, you welcome me, you welcome God, so **welcoming child is welcoming God**). If this child is God-bearing how dare we accord the child no status? **Now THAT should silence the disciples!**
- I note that a “child” then might not be every child now: it would not be my grandchild who has clothes and toys and swimming lessons. It might be a child in Yemen, Kashechewan, in detention centres in the US border, kids raised in Canadian prisons, one of the world’s 28 million child refugees...
- the “Child” or “little one” now might be an adult who is without status now...perhaps living in poverty, with addiction, or homelessness or debilitating illness....

Jesus says, “Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.”

Now let’s look for a moment at the concept of serving. [I lament that our news does not report equally on service and scandal.]

Diakonos—the Greek word here—has come to mean minister, but at the time it meant servant, the one who serves food. Largely invisible. You don’t see them in the picture of the Last Supper; the food server was lower in rank than a scribe or sword bearer or messenger. The lowly food server would only get to eat whatever was left when everyone else had eaten his fill.

One suggested song for this service was Welcome Table, a spiritual. [sing: *I’m going to sit at the Welcome Table, I’m going to sit at the Welcome Table, one of these days Hallelujah....*] African Americans, born into slavery were never welcome to their human masters’ tables, and this song echoed their hopes of tables turned in future glory. Where all God’s children would sit together.

Now Jesus NOT speaking to servants, or slaves, telling them to stay in their proper place and he is not telling us to be doormats or stay silent about oppression. [Jesus never condones oppression. He opposes it. Then he sacrifices himself, which is nonviolent resistance rather than giving in.]

When Jesus speaks to the disciples, he sees them as people who have at least some **privilege**. That is why he reprimands them. [They perhaps picture some glory in being connected to the Messiah, the predicted King. But now, they are being told to be “servants of all.”]

Why is this so hard for us to accept? Why was it hard for the disciples to accept?

- We want to win. We want to be strong not vulnerable, be in control, not be controlled.
- I don’t think that many of us want to consider ourselves as people of privilege. I am trying to reflect and act upon this line I read in a *Sojourners* magazine: **“How will I use my privilege to serve those who do not share it.”** (Sept-Oct. 2018 issue)

- We resist collective responsibility. [As a teacher I did cafeteria supervision, which often meant rescuing good fruit for hungry students and picking up stray food bits before they could be food fight ammunition. When I asked students to pick up garbage the answer was often, “Why should I pick up someone else’s garbage? In a way it reminds me of when we protest, “Why should I apologize for something my ancestors did?”]

Radical servant leadership is not just for the church, it is also the witness of the church to the world. These are the times when we have to “be the bigger person” which means “stooping”. A good question for us as churches might be: when people come into our church communities, will they see a hierarchy that resembles the world and the empire, or will they see an “upside down” hospitality: where everyone has a valued place and a valued voice and where those with the most power and status serve those with the least? Will it look like the picture I showed the children? Will leaders be cheering for the people in most difficulty?

Gandhi says this of service: “Service which is rendered without joy helps neither the servant nor the served. But all other pleasures and possessions pale into nothingness before service which is rendered in a spirit of joy.

Given Jesus’ command, how can we be strengthened for service, how can we cheerfully and gracefully accept to be “servant of all?”

- **We have Jesus’ example** - Throughout his life, he associated with the last and least in society: a Gentile woman, Mark 7:24-30, a bleeding woman (Mark 5:24-34), lepers (Mark 1:40-45), raging demoniac (Mark 5:1-20) tax collectors, and other notorious sinners (Mark 1:13-17). He stooped and washed the disciples’ feet. He says in Luke 22:27, “I am among you as one who serves.”
- **We have examples around and among us.** I have seen **our Sudbury ministers** mopping the floor, changing the toilet paper, baking gluten free brownies for an event, digging in the church yard. They are servant leaders.
- **Wab Kinew**, is the leader of the opposition in the Manitoba government, a position with significant authority. You would think that when he won his leadership convention, that he would have led the victorious walk into the hall. But instead his wife Lisa prayed for and poured out water before anyone entered. He says “Some of us are water carriers and some of us are water protectors. I was happy to follow her as she blessed the sacred ground in a holy way. Being a leader does not mean putting yourself first, it means serving our community in whatever way we need.”
- **Nurses in Vancouver [slide]** You are looking at Evanna Brennan, 71 and Susan Giles, 65 (from “Angels on Call” in *The United Church Observer* July/August 2018 issue). They work in Downtown Eastside Vancouver. For much of their career, they worked in home care. In the 90s before retroviral drugs, they ministered during the AIDs crisis. After retiring, they were nursing consultants, but then the opioid crisis hit, and they have gone back into street nursing. Who they serve keeps changing, but how they serve is as Jesus served: it is relational. The care and treatment come with compassion, hugs, prayer, interest in the peoples’ lives, and include going to their homes under a bridge and attending their funerals.

Now I AM LOOKING at a serving community! [people in St. Andrew's congregation]

- Your Out of the Cold ministry is a "Welcome Table" where you serve some who have little.
- And I saw how you spoke out publicly against racism when disgusting posters appeared downtown. And I like to think I am part of that kind of serving community, too.

And yet I am not sure we can be totally comfortable; since—just like for the nurses—perhaps **how and who we serve continues to evolve**. We are called to not put ourselves in the centre, but perhaps be the listeners and put some who feel on the outside in the centre for a while. At General Council in Oshawa this summer, our racialized siblings in the United Church needed to speak in the centre. It was not an easy experience for anyone present, but it felt as if Jesus was there.

I invite you to think of the strongest most powerful experience you have had as you served someone vulnerable with little status. Perhaps it was a lonely child, an elder with dementia, or someone living on the street. Remember how your heart felt warm. Your compassionate service mattered deeply to a valued child of God.

When we accept this vulnerable Jesus as the Messiah, **servanthood is our particular calling as Christians**.

I will end with this. If Jesus walks in on us and asks, "So, what were you talking about just now?" I pray that we will not stand there in an embarrassed silence, but speak hopefully about someone new sitting at the Welcome Table with us. May we all be strengthened for service, following the example of our Servant King. Amen.