

## Mark 9:33-37

### “Ministry in the Margins”

Soon after I started as Interim Minister here, I was sitting at my desk one day making some notes. A church member came in and asked me what I was doing and I answered, “Working on a sermon.” She asked, “Why aren’t you using the computer? Do you write them out longhand?” I held up my notes and explained that this was the “working on” part that comes before the actual writing part. Here are my notes from this past week, complete with scribbles, stars, colors and symbols that have meaning to me.

After I studied the text for today and started to actually write from the note I had made, I began to notice all the things I had written out here. Of course, everyone knows that this area is called (? Wait for responses from congregation) That’s right! The margins. This is where I write hymns that come to my mind as I work, possible sermon titles, information for footnoting so I can’t be accused of plagiarizing in the unlikely event that my sermons are ever published.

I also write quotes, reminders of illustrations that I have heard that would fit in with the sermon, whether thoughts are theological or pastoral. In fact, some of the most important things that go into the sermon-writing process at *my* desk are written in the margins. One might even say that some of the most important ministry happens in the margins.

Well, that is what Jesus Christ seems to be saying with his words to his disciples. This story, which is found in all three of the Synoptic Gospels, is one that makes us wonder what Jesus was thinking when he chose these particular twelve men to help him build the kingdom of God because they are so often clueless!

Frederick Buechner says that the twelve disciples were the first ministers. He adds: “There is no evidence that Jesus chose them because they were brighter or nicer than other

people. In fact . . . they were continually missing the point, jockeying for position, and when the chips were down, interested in nothing so much as saving their own skins. Their sole qualifications seem to have been their initial willingness to rise to their feet when Jesus said, 'Follow Me.'" (1) I suppose his words should be comforting to us all!

This conversation takes place after Jesus tells his disciples that soon, he will be betrayed, killed and rise up from the dead. Of course, this would be hard for anyone to understand, especially in first Century Palestine where it had not been heard about over and over again for 2000 years. But rather than asking for a deeper explanation, they began arguing among themselves about who was greater than the other.

Two significant things are shared with us in this passage that help us determine Jesus' true intentions with his words and actions that followed. First, we are told that Jesus took them to the house. This was to say that his discussion was not meant for anyone else's ears but only for those who were his closest friends. When they got there, Jesus asked what they had been arguing about.

The disciples were silent, not because they were amazed that he realized THAT they were arguing but because they were embarrassed over the subject matter. This is not hard to imagine since any one of us would be silent if Jesus Christ confronted us about something we were ashamed of. And this is where second important thing happens. Mark tells us that Jesus sat down.

In Biblical times, a good Jewish man who wanted to increase his faith became a disciple of one the local rabbis. The learning process meant that a disciple followed his rabbi as he walked from place to place, teaching and talking and dissecting the Law of Moses. But if a rabbi had something really important to say, if he wanted to stress the point he was making, HE SAT

DOWN. When Jesus took the disciples inside a house and sat down, they knew that they were getting ready to hear something of great importance. Even a disciple who was one brick shy of a load knew to listen up when Jesus sat.

Yet, Jesus muddled their minds even further by taking a nearby child in his arms and giving them a lesson on true greatness. He tells them that in order to be truly great, they must be willing to be last and to welcome a little child in the name of God. This is a shocking statement! Yet Jesus is not so much admonishing their desire to be first as he is challenging their assumptions about achievement.

However, there is something even more radical that Jesus' actions are implying. By taking the child and welcoming it into their midst, Jesus is making a statement on the issue of inclusion. He is basically telling all of his dim-witted disciples, including you and me, that the most important ministry takes place in the margins.

The Jewish world of the Greco-Roman society that Jesus was born in listed those who should be INCLUDED as males of a certain educational status and lineage. And in accordance with the Law of Moses, worship was further limited to people without physical, emotional or spiritual imperfections. *These were the ones worthy of hearing the words of the Rabbis.* This meant that women, children, the poor, the foreigner, those who had mental illness or physical ailments that were visible or distracting, the very young, the very old were not worthy. They could not worship. They could not learn from the rabbis. And over the years, we have lumped them into one word. The MARGINALIZED!

Jesus Christ turned the world on its head by saying that everyone is worthy. He told the disciples that day, "Reach right out in to the margins and grab the first child you see and teach

them my ways. Better yet, learn from them. Include them – for of such is the kingdom of Heaven.”

And lest they not understand his point, Jesus chose his words carefully. He said if anyone wanted to be first, they must be “servant of all”. He used this phrase for a reason because it seems that there were classes everywhere – even among the servants. You see a servant, or in Greek, “doulos”, was the one who served the meals, who answered the door and took your cloak and rinsed your feet.

But a servant of all, a “diakonos”, waited on the other servants, fed *them* and washed *their* feet. They were the lowest of low. The bottom of the totem pole. You would never want your daughter to bring a diakonos home for dinner! Yet this is the word that Jesus chose. So Jesus said that radical servant leadership is the way to witness to the world, to make a statement about what it really means to be a church. In order to be great, one must be a servant of all!

And to drive the nail a little further into the coffin of social norms, Mark uses an even more telling word for “child” in the Greek. The word that is chosen is a word that has no gender or age. Now children, that is to say “teknon” in Greek, had no value other to be seen as a possession of a household and to carry on the name. But Mark says that Jesus took a “*paidon*” which translates as a child who is not yet a person.

Jesus brings a child, literally a nobody, into the inner circle of the inner circle. And lest we not understand, Mark makes it clear by the choice of his words that Jesus meant that **ANYONE** who has need of help is to be welcomed, learned from, and ministered to.

So as we continue to seek the wisdom of the Holy Spirit for the body of Christ at Nazareth Presbyterian Church, I think this story in Mark’s Gospel begs two questions. First, are we **REALLY** inclusive? Do **WE** minister in the margins? How many of us have been to The

Carpenter's Table, served in the Soup Kitchen, delivered a meal to a shut-in or visited the campus of Thornwell? Would we truly welcome a same gender couple, a homeless person or a young man with a blue mohawk and three nose rings into our worship?

And an equally important question is this: do we value the child, the not yet person, in this body of disciples? I cannot answer the first question, although I know what I hope the answer would be. But after two years as your pastor, I have a lot to say about the second one.

I have watched with tears, horror and admiration as the courageous young gymnasts read their impact statements in court this week for the judge and the world to hear. I fought back tears as she sentenced the ex-team doctor to up to 170 years in prison for abusing and molesting young women over a period of more than 20 years! My heart aches for the innocence and trust that was stolen from those girls that can never be given back.

And it reminded me that it is the job of every adult here to make the world and the church a safe place for our children to grow in faith. A place where they are nurtured and loved and taught by our words and our actions that each child here has value as a child created in the image of God. There are many adults in this room today who struggle with this fundamental truth because they were not taught or shown the inclusive love of Jesus Christ that dissolves the margins created by the world. It is our responsibility to love the child as he or she becomes the adult that God is calling them to be! I think we do an admirable job of this here. And I hope and pray that we will continue to walk that path of faith that I see you walking every day.

At Nazareth Presbyterian church, it warms my heart to see how intentional you are to spread your "Pennies for Hunger" to every bucket so every child feels important. We have just spent a lot of money putting panes of glass in every Sunday School door so that children will not feel isolated or afraid. And so that adults can be on the look-out for things or people that might

be dangerous. We have created a nursery for infants so the ones that are toddling won't step on the ones who still lie on their tummies on the blanket.

In the same way, I applaud you all because I have seen fathers tell children who are not their own to stop talking in church and mothers clean up messes that their own children did not make. I have seen couples whose children are grown take the time to mentor those in Confirmation and people who do not need one more cookie or chocolate covered pretzel or T-Shirt make purchases that support the Boy Scouts, the Girl Scouts, the Senior project.

These may seem like small things at the time but it communicates to a child that they are a valued member of this family. That we have a vested interest in what kind of adult, what kind of citizen, what kind of Christian they grow to be. On an even greater level, our Presbytery is finalizing the Child, Youth and Vulnerable Adult Protection Policy which will be adopted by this church to make an official statement that we will protect and nurture those who need it most.

At one time, our Session even talked about making 2018 "The Year of the Child" at Nazareth, with a more concentrated effort on nurturing our children from cradle to college. We don't know exactly what that would look like, but we need to do everything in our power to make every day about providing safety, dignity and love for the children that God has lent us.

When I served at Presbyterian home, my closest friend there was Stacey, a lifelong Southern Baptist. Every now and then she would come into my office, shut the door and say, "The Lord just laid it on my heart for me to tell you this!" That was a foreign concept to me and I often wondered if it hurt when the Lord laid something on your heart. But the more I grew to love her, the more I understood.

So I can only say that some time ago, even before Advent, the Lord "laid it on my heart" to preach from this passage, but I didn't know why. It seemed so cut and dried. When Jesus

reached into the margins and pulled a child into the inner circle of his disciples and called her a blessing, his actions and his words were radical in the context of the culture that they lived in. But that was over 2000 years ago. And they should not sound radical to us. They should be the norm.

So I would like to invite anyone in this sanctuary who is 18 or younger to come join me here at the front of the church. Friends, these are **OUR** children. They are a blessing and our greatest gift from God. And it is up to each of us to be sure that they can count on us to correct them when they are wrong and by the same token to stand up for them when they have **been** wronged. To be their advocates!

Every one of us here knows that we live in a world where bad things happen to good people. The only way we can start to change this fact is to make sure that any child who is in our presence will know that IN THIS PLACE they will receive the love that they were born to receive, be shown the dignity that they deserve to live with and be surrounded with the safety that Jesus calls us to provide. We have to get this right in the church! Because friends if we cannot get THIS right in the church, we cannot expect the world to get it right either. Amen.

The Rev. Julie Schaaf

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(1) Wishful Thinking, Frederick Buechner, Harper Collins, San Francisco, 1973, pg. 74.