

Service Not Status
Rev. Stephanie Ryder
Mark 9:30-37
September 20, 2015

Children love to ask questions. Their curiosity is unquenchable. As a parent, it can be exhausting fielding the relentless questions. I remember one evening after a long day of many questions, my son asked, "Mama, why do airplanes look like they're going slow but they're really going fast?" As I was devising an answer, he had already moved on, to ask "Mama, why can't our teeth break plastic?" My other son loved to ask people how old they were. I would gently tell him this was impolite, until my father noted that he was just imitating what everyone seemed to ask him: "How old are you?" Soon enough, though, he stopped asking. As a preschool teacher, I remember at lunchtime one 4-year old asking me about her friend that was putting away her lunchbox: "Is Monica Japanese?" "Yes," I said, "What was your clue?" She replied, "Well, she eats sushi!" Currently, with Compassionate Kids, I continue to adore the questions that I am asked. "What does God look like?" "Does God have a beard?"

Children's questions exemplify their thirst for knowledge and understanding, as well as their lack of intimidation. Indeed, asking questions, I think, reflects a security in the questioner -- an interesting balance of humility and security: humility for the admission that one does not have all knowledge nor all the answers, and security because of the courage to ask.

The gospel passage today begins with Jesus telling the disciples for the second time about his impending death. The Scripture says that disciples don't understand, but they are afraid to ask. This could be because in the passage last week, when Jesus told them what was going to happen to him, that he would suffer and be killed and after three days rise again, a rebuking ensued. Peter first rebuked Jesus about his shocking pronouncement and then Jesus rebuked Peter, calling him Satan and saying he had misguided concerns. Jesus then said that being a disciple meant taking up one's cross and following him and losing one's life in order to save it. He said that to be ashamed of this will lead to eventual shaming.

So, I sort of see why the disciples don't understand and are afraid to ask when Jesus mentions his fate a second time. First, who wants to run the risk of being called Satan? Second, this talk about taking up one's cross, losing one's life in order to save it, suffering, being killed, and then rising again after three days, we're still grappling with all this after the fact. It makes sense that they were confused, and maybe trying to process it all. On the other hand, is there perhaps another reason they remain silent and don't ask him to explain further? Is it because they don't want to appear ignorant? Could they not try a different tact, and rather than, like Peter, criticizing Jesus and telling him off, could they perhaps gently say, "Hey, um, Jesus, we don't

really get it... could you tell us what you mean?" And this is exactly what the rest of the passage implies.

Since they don't ask for further explanation, Jesus, instead, asks them a question: What were you arguing about on the way here? Again, they remain silent. They know he knows, and that what they were arguing about is not what Jesus would hold up as relevant; they were arguing about who is the greatest. The Greek word for "greatest," μέγιστον from the root word "Mega" is defined in this context as "those who surpass others in excellence, worth, or authority; based on rank according to persons renowned for their ability, virtue, influence or power." They were arguing about who was the mega-disciple. It probably sounded something like the presidential candidate debate this past Wednesday night! Perhaps it sounded something like this: "Well, I'm the one who always finds Jesus when he's off praying," "I was the first one Jesus picked to be a disciple," "I've definitely caught the most fish recently," "Uh, no, you're wrong about that, I've caught the most!" "Ok, but how many demons have you cast out?" "If it weren't for my rowing skill, I don't know if we'd have ever made it to the other side of the lake!" "But why do you always forget to bring the bread?" "Hey, why do you think you weren't asked to go up on the mountain?"

Jesus does not criticize them, though, for this. Instead, he sits down and calls them together. He offers his classic upside-down perspective. If you want to be in first place, you must be last, and a servant of all. It may sound like a punishment, like being sent to the back of the line for bad behavior. It is hard for the disciples, for us, to understand, because being last sounds like a life-sentence. What Jesus is saying, though, is that the strivings to be great by the world's standards are not at all what make us great by God's standards. God is not concerned with rank and awards and prestige and power and status and winning. These are worldly ideas of greatness. Being last is not a punishment, it is a soul-saver, it is what brings us into God's peaceable kingdom, and it is how we connect with Jesus and God, the one who sent him. It is how we gain eternal life. The message is that if you want to be first, if you want to really win, it is through shedding selfish-ambition and ego, and putting on humility, to be of service to others; it is through taking a deep breath and being okay with exactly where we are, letting go of the striving to be at the front of the line. How do we do this?

Jesus shows the disciples by placing a child among them, and holding the child close. "Whoever welcomes one of these little children in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me does not welcome me but the one who sent me." To follow Christ, to have a closer relationship with God, is like welcoming a child. What does it take to welcome a child? What does this mean?

It means changing everything.

To welcome a child, we must set aside our plans and agendas. We must slow down our pace. We must sit down, or kneel down, to be at a child's level. We can't talk to

a child if we're up on a high horse. We must quiet our racing minds and pay attention to what's right in front of us. Being present with a child means letting go of our worries about the future and our regrets of the past.

Have you ever taken a walk with a two year old? They stop to watch an ant, to closely observe a curling leaf, to dig for the roly-poly bug that buried itself in the dirt. They ask questions. Important ones. Being with a child requires being fully present. And this, Jesus says, is what matters most. This is how we get ahead and advance on the spiritual trajectory: to set aside our own agendas and power-seeking motives, and instead to look in wonder and awe at God's creation, and ask how we can be of help.

There was an article this week in the Marin Independent Journal entitled, "Mayo Clinic doctor has your prescription for happiness." Dr. Amit Sood claims that though we can't buy happiness, we can achieve it by training our brains to feel less stressed. He says that our thoughts, if left unchecked, will veer toward searching for potential threats and faultfinding, a natural tendency groomed by our ancestors having to worry about protecting themselves for safety and survival. "Our brains are not hard-wired for contentment," Sood says, "however, we can create new neural pathways that lead to a happier outlook. The first step is training our attention. As we grow older, we have seen and experienced so much that we tend to stop noticing or being fascinated by the things and people we encounter in our daily lives. That feeling of wonderment we experienced regularly as a child leaves us, and our brains move quickly from one thing to the next." Dr. Sood in his research has found what Jesus was trying to teach the disciples so long ago. Welcome a child, or the perspective of a child, and you welcome God's presence in your life.

Welcoming a child also means celebrating and welcoming those who can benefit you the least. Do you ever hear people bragging about having had dinner with their 3-year old neighbor? Commentator Daniel Clendenin says, "To welcome a child is to extend the simplest of acts to an individual whom society dismisses as perhaps cute but ultimately insignificant, someone who lacks any accomplishments, greatness, status, or pretensions. By extension, Jesus invites us to welcome every person in the same manner, without regard for external measures of their worldly importance."

I'm thinking about the thousands upon thousands of people showing up upon unfamiliar shores, the thousands upon thousands waiting at the border crossings. How are they being welcomed? I'm thinking about the thousands upon thousands being evacuated from their homes because of fires. How are they being welcomed? As we consider how we as individuals, or as a church, or as a country, welcome those who may have no apparent benefit to us, let us also reflect upon who are the particular groups or individuals for whom welcome doesn't come easy for us? What suspicions, judgments, and perceptions do we have that make welcoming certain people a challenge? What might we do to practice welcome across age, race, ethnicity, national origin, language, income, religion, and sexual orientation? One 21-year old Syrian migrant, who arrived in Turkey nine months ago, was quoted in

the NY Times as having said, "We are not terrorists. We escaped war, and we want to have a normal life."

Our worth is not dependent upon our worldly success. The good news is that we are all beloved sons and daughters for whom Christ died, to reunite with God and with each other. Posturing about who is the greatest is a waste of energy and time. We are all servants of the One who came to serve.

The reading from James today tells us that to have pure heavenly wisdom from above, we must let go of envy and selfish ambition and draw near to God. Drawing near to God will allow for everything else in our lives to be put in its proper place. Jesus tells us to draw near to God is to let go of our worldly need to be the best, and focus instead on how we can be of service to others, and to welcome a child. Every one of us is valued in the highest esteem by God. Jesus died that we might live. Though this may still today be hard to understand, though we may, like the disciples, have questions, let us not be afraid to ask.

You'll see some paper and pens at the end of the pews. I encourage you to write down a question you may have about faith, God or the Bible, and put it in the offering plate when it is passed later in the service. Heather is going to play the next hymn two times through before we start singing, so that you have some time to write. You don't have to put your name on it. Know that just as we give God our time, talents, and treasures, we also can gratefully give our questions, challenges and doubts, like a welcomed child. In doing this, let us trust that we are loved and accepted and embraced and cherished and adored by God exactly as we are, even though we don't have all the answers. Amen.