

**Wesley United Methodist Church**

September 23, 2018

“The Greatest.”

Mark 9:30-37

Children. Several years ago, a couple books were published entitled Children’s Letters to God and More Children’s Letters to God which collected some rather clever letters from youngsters to the Almighty. Let’s listen to a few of them:

Dear God, in Sunday school they told us what you do. Who does it when you are on vacation? \* Jane

Dear God, is it true my father won’t get in heaven if he uses his bowling words in the house? \* Anita

Dear God, did you mean for the giraffe to look like that or was it an accident? \* Norma

Dear God, instead of letting people die and having to make new ones, why don’t you just keep the ones you have now?

\* Jane

Dear God, did you really mean “do unto others as they do unto you?” Because if you did, then I’m going to fix my brother! \* Darla

Dear God, thank you for the baby brother, but what I prayed for was a puppy. \* Joyce

Dear God, maybe Cain and Abel would not kill each other so much if they had their own rooms. It works with my brother. \* Larry

Kids. Munchkins. Rug Rats. Ragamuffins. You gotta love ‘em. Jesus obviously did. Youngsters appear regularly in the gospel narratives. There must have been something not only winsome but downright fun about Jesus for kids to want to be around him. And Jesus obviously appreciated the perspective of children – he went so far as to make that statement that unless we have the kind of faith that children have, we will miss out on the kingdom. What is that perspective? Trust? Some. Dependence? A bit. Humility? A little, maybe. All of those are true to an extent. Actually, I think the childlike quality Jesus means most is the sense of wonder about life, the curiosity that is evident in those letters to God, the obvious joy in being alive, ready for whatever new adventure might come along.

But for all the warm, fuzzy things we say about children, the other side of that coin is that children are often a big nuisance. They start out by causing incredible pain to Mom in child birth, not to mention the incredible pain on the bank account. They interrupt sleep schedules. They offer strange smelling discharges from various bodily orifices, and often all over you. They cost thousands of dollars to feed and clothe and they repay your generosity with a thumb of the nose. They aggravate, irritate, infuriate. Finally, they get married and want a huge reception with ice sculptures etc. Trouble.

Much as we find in our scripture this morning. Jesus asks the Twelve, “What were you arguing about on the road?” Silence. Kind of embarrassed silence. Because they had argued about who was the greatest.

Actually, there is only one we knew as “the greatest.” Muhammad Ali. (And you thought I was going to say Jesus.) Ali was a fascinating character and has been since his brash days in Louisville when people knew him as Cassius Clay and heard his boastful claim, made over and over again through the years, the “I AM THE GREATEST!” A sportswriter once asked him, “When you say, ‘I Am the Greatest,’ do you mean the greatest fighter or the greatest human being? Ali replied quickly, “I mean that I am the greatest boxer of all time.” The writer pressed him further, “But do you think that 50 years from now people will say that you were the greatest?” Ali responded, “Fifty years from now everybody in this room will be dead. Nobody will remember what a great boxer I was. The only way I will not be forgotten is if I can do something to help and aid my people.” Smart man.

I wish, after almost 2,000 years of hearing the gospel story we just read, the world (not to mention the church) was that smart. Jesus says, “If anyone wants to be first, he must be the very least, and the servant of all.” Then after Jesus picks up a little one who happens to be handy, he says, “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.”

The implications of that are more than a bit unsettling. Jesus doesn’t say tolerate the child or even provide for the child. The Greek work means accept, but the translation welcome is appropriate. To welcome someone implies that we gladly extend our hospitality. Who is this we welcome? Those who have no status, those who may well be dirty, even filthy, possibly diseased, and most assuredly those at the bottom of the social ladder. Children in that day were not thought of as much more than property.

I would love to be able to report that the condition of children in this world is significantly improved since Jesus’ time. After all, one of the few things that churches do not debate is that “Jesus loves the little children, all the children of the world.” Then why do we have estimates that thirty-five thousand children under the age of five die daily around the globe, most from preventable poverty conditions. The financial cost to end most of these child deaths, is about \$2.5 billion a year, which is the amount Americans spend on chewing gum.

Could we manage that? After all, Jesus himself says that these are the emissaries of the Almighty, “the least of these...”

Well, we try. After all, don't we support the Cooperative Care and the Soup Kitchen to feed the hungry? Don't we support efforts like Habitat for Humanity and NeighborWorks to provide decent homes for those who would never have them without our help?

Don't we blister our feet marching for the sole purpose of helping find a cure for a horrible disease? And don't we contribute our money to all sorts of worthy causes, both in the church and out? Absolutely! And we do not do badly, if we do say so ourselves. Remember Matthew 25, "Just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me."

A young rabbinical student asked the rabbi, "Rabbi, why don't people see God today as they did in the olden days?" The wise old man put his hands on the student's shoulders and said, "The answer, my son, is because no one is willing to stoop so low."

An interesting thought: what would our answer be if Jesus came to us and asked, "What were you arguing about on the road?" Well, Lord, we were arguing about whether women were equal to men. We were arguing about language for God, should we use masculine, feminine, both, neither? We were arguing about sexuality, if folks are homosexual, should they be included in the church?

We were arguing about how much money to pay to support the mission of the church around the world when we have so many needs at home.

Or, with the disciples, we might just admit that our arguments are over who is going to be top dog around here, the decision maker, the one to whom everyone else will have to listen.

The one thing I want you to notice is Jesus' response. He does not put that ambition down, does not say how awful it is to want to be great...or even THE GREATEST. Instead, he says here is the way to do it. Be a servant. Be a servant. That was Jesus' message today. And remember, "Whoever welcomes one such...in my name welcomes me..."