



“Who is Welcome?”

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Mark 9:30-37

As of yesterday, summer is over and it is officially autumn. I know it doesn't really feel very fall-like right now, but before we know it we will be barreling on towards the Holidays. I have already begun to think about what Advent and Christmas will look like for us this year here at Royal Lane. I came across a story the other day as I was sermon planning and researching. It's a Christmas story, but I feel like it has something to tell us about today's lectionary text.

Wally was an awkward and shy child who belonged to his church's kids drama club. It was time to hand out roles for the Christmas play, but what role should the director give Wally? She decided on the inn-keeper. It was an important role, but it required Wally to say only one important line “Sorry, we've no room.” Wally grinned from ear to ear when he learned of his critical role and he couldn't wait for the big night.

It arrived soon enough, and the play was proceeding according to plan. Mary and Joseph had traveled to Bethlehem and come to the door of the inn. Joseph knocked on the door and it opened to Wally. “Please sir, do you have a room we could take?” asked Joseph. Wally shook his head and replied. “I'm sorry, we've no room”.

Now the boy playing Joseph was a particularly confident child, and while the script called for Mary and he to turn away at this point, Joseph decided to exercise some dramatic license. “But sir” he said to the innkeeper, “My wife is about to have her baby and we need somewhere to stay. Couldn't you find us a room.” Wally's face went white – this was not planned for! – and he paused for a moment before repeating his line. “I'm sorry, we've no room.”

“But sir” replied Joseph, “We've traveled such a long way and we've nowhere else to go and my wife is very tired. Surely you can find us somewhere.” Wally bowed his head, shook it sadly and said, “I'm sorry, we've no room.” Forlornly Joseph and Mary started walking away. Wally, now fully into his role, felt shamed and saddened. A tear trickled down his cheek. Then his voice was heard calling out. “Wait! Please come back. You can have my room.”

It may not have been according to script, but at that moment Wally gave a perfect expression of what it means to welcome.

Who is welcome? Who is welcome in our inns, in our rooms, in our homes, in our faith communities, in our circles, in our lives? It seems the disciples in the Gospel of Mark were constantly pondering who Jesus was and who Jesus had called them to welcome. Last week Jesus questioned his disciples, “Who do you say that I am,” and Peter confessed him to be the Messiah, “You are the Christ.” But, as we saw, Peter really didn't know who Jesus was. Because,

according to the text, Jesus immediately said, “Get behind me Satan,” signifying that Peter thought Jesus was a powerful, political, military leader rather than the suffering servant Jesus called himself time after time after time. Then we get to today’s scripture reading when the disciples were arguing along the way about who was the greatest. They were concerned about their own placement in the pecking order, their own power and prestige. Their argument showed that the disciples were still clueless about what it meant to follow Jesus, even after he asked them to take up their crosses, even after he foretold his own resurrection, even after he chastised his disciples for arguing about who was the greatest among them, and even after he pointed to a child as a model for discipleship. Jesus’ followers were still clueless about who indeed was welcome in the wide arms of God.

So, as we look at this central story of the disciples fighting over their own greatness, we notice that it is bookended, surrounded by two exorcisms. In the text before this one, the disciples tried to exorcise a demon from a boy but ended up failing miserably, apparently because they didn’t pray well enough. Then, after the disciples were unsuccessful, Jesus rebuked them severely, saying, “How much longer must I be among you? How much longer must I put up with you?” That’s harsh. Then, in the text that follows our Gospel lesson for today, the disciples went to Jesus complaining that they had seen a man casting out demons in Jesus’ name. They again whined to Jesus, “We tried to stop him because he was not following us. He was not in our circle; we didn’t give him permission; he didn’t have the right credentials.” The childish, whiny, grumbling disciples were clueless about who was truly welcome in the kingdom of God, who were truly companions of Jesus on the way.

But instead of asking Jesus where they went wrong, or who they should’ve been welcoming along the way, or even to take a just single minute to ask Jesus to clarify what he meant when he said that he would have to suffer and die, these disciples decided to argue amongst themselves like crabby kids in the backseat of a mini-van. I can see Jesus now, “You all better calm down back there or I’m going to turn this car around.” And since they were secretly fighting over who was the greatest among them, I suspect they didn’t want to show their ignorance in front of each other by asking Jesus to clarify and to intervene. I suspect they didn’t want to be seen as the least capable of the disciples. I suspect they wanted to pretend they understood who this Messiah was and what he would do to usher in the reign of God. I suspect they were afraid to talk to Jesus directly because their priority was how they would appear to each other. They were afraid to truly understand Jesus’s call to welcome all.

Throughout Mark’s Gospel, the disciples seem to remain at about the same level of understanding, which is really none. And, as I said, I think they partly didn’t get it because they were afraid to ask. But also, they were asking the wrong question. They didn’t ask, “How can I better understand and live out Jesus’ identity and mission?” But rather, they asked, “How can I be the greatest?” Their focus on their reputations and their positions of power, a priority each of them seemed to hold secretly in their hearts, came to the surface in their private argument over who was the greatest. And this argument made them look childish, rather than childlike. It turns out that to be great is not to impress the crowds with grand displays of healing or to try to become the teacher’s pet. It is to welcome those on the margins, those on the outside of the circle. It turns out that greatness lies in receiving the one who is not viewed as great by the

culture, the child, the one who is beyond the circle, the one who needs a genuine and holy welcome.

But instead of asking Jesus what it meant to be great, the disciples refused to ask Jesus questions, to go to Jesus with their needs and fears. And so, they started to argue with one another, squabbling over who was better and great and had a higher rank in Jesus' eyes. Amy Oden, a professor at St. Paul School of Theology, said, "When the disciples avoid asking hard questions, they focus on posturing about who is right." But isn't that what might happen to us as a church, as a people, as a nation if we refuse to talk to other people, learn from each other, build relationships and have conversations? How would the disciple have been different if they had faced their insecurities and fears and asked Jesus questions? We must stop arguing on the way and draw close to Jesus as well as welcome those on the margins as our own. None of us is great without each other and without Jesus.

And what do we need most from Jesus when we are bickering amongst each other like little kids and we are distracted and hurt and confused? We need a teaching. Jesus taught his followers that being great meant being a servant of all. Basically, Jesus did a children's sermon. He enacted an object lesson. He placed a child in front of his disciples, took the child in his arms, and told the followers to welcome this child, welcome all, and in turn welcome him. He said, "Whoever welcomes one of these children in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me does not only welcome me but the one who sent me." Matthew's Gospel says the same thing, "Unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven." And then just one chapter later in Mark the disciples acted like they had never experienced Jesus' loving and welcoming of children when they rebuked people bringing their little children to Jesus for a blessing. And so, Jesus condemned them again, "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. I tell you the truth, anyone who does not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it."

Jesus wanted his followers to see the child and welcome the child. Not because the child was innocent or pure or perfect or cute or curious. No, Jesus wanted them to welcome the child because the child was on the margins, at the bottom of the social ladder. Preacher and professor, Barbara Lundblad, recognizes that "In the Gospel of Mark children are often sick or disabled: Jairus' daughter is near death when her father kneels before Jesus; the Syrophenician woman's little daughter is possessed by an unclean spirit; and just before today's text, a man brings his son to Jesus. The boy had experienced terrible convulsions since childhood and the disciples weren't able to heal him. But Jesus commanded the spirit to leave the boy, then lifted him to new life. Children in Mark are not symbols of holiness or innocence, but more often they are the victims of poverty and disease. Jesus brings the child from the margins into the very center. This child is not a symbol but a person, a little person easily overlooked, often unseen and unheard."

The disciples saw the child that was moved to the middle of the circle and were commanded to welcome the child because it was a gesture of acceptance to a class of people that society normally dismissed as insignificant and worthless, who were not great in status, in rank, or in accomplishments. The disciples should have been arguing about how they could be like little children, those on the outside, those not welcome, those who felt insignificant and alone. That's who the disciples should have been imitating because those are the very people that God is with.

God was with the children. God was with those on the margins. And they are the ones Jesus commanded us to welcome. So, for the disciples, it wasn't so much a question of who is great and who is not, but instead it is a question of welcome. Amy Allen, a Professor at Vanderbilt Divinity School puts it another way. She says, "Jesus isn't interested in who we say is the greatest or even in who acts like the greatest or looks to be great. Jesus is interested in who acts with the greatest grace, compassion, and love."

If we are to learn anything from Jesus' teaching today, it would be that we are great when we are servants of all. We really need to notice that Jesus's conversation with his followers in the text occurred immediately after Peter's confession that Jesus was the Messiah. But, remember that Peter thought the Messiah was a powerful, political leader, not a servant. That's where Peter and the disciples felt that true greatness resided... in power. But it is the story of Peter's misinterpretation of the Messiah and these disciples trying to be great that we come to the physical center, the middle of Mark's Gospel. The center of our faith, just like the center of the circle where this child was placed by Jesus, is not about position. The center of our faith is not about power. The center of our faith is not about possession. The center of our faith is not about prestige. The center of our faith is not about privilege. The center of our faith is about servanthood and suffering and sacrifice and, most of all, welcome.

And, for Jesus, this image of servanthood found flesh and blood, found feet that trod the borders and boundaries, found hands that reach to the margins, found a body that died on the cross. Jesus tried to get through to his hardheaded disciples that the Messiah was not one who would come in power and glory, but would be a servant who would give himself for others – a servant who would join hands with the weak and vulnerable in order to bring them into the circle of community and love – true servants who would follow him on the way.

Jesus asks us to follow him on that road today. Jesus asks us to be children of the way. Will we choose to pick up our crosses and leave the power of the world behind in order to carry the punishment, the pain, and the imperfection of a suffering servant? Or will we strive to be on top, using whatever means necessary to have and hold power? I don't know about you, but I grew up competing to be the best, to make top grades in school, to be the best musician, the best artist, the best person, the best friend. It seems that the version of life we live today is all about competition and tribalism and "us versus them," and that we have to be better than someone else. But I would posit that Jesus offers another view, another version of life, a subversive idea of who is the greatest. Jesus' way is a version of reality that says that deep joy, deep commitment, and deep welcome happen when we live in servanthood, when we give ourselves to one another. That is the Jesus way. Because Jesus became human, gave up everything, gave up the glories of heaven, gave up greatness, to trod on our rocky ground and feel our pains and experience our heartaches. Jesus found greatness in being in solidarity with us rather than being separated from us.

And that is what Jesus is calling us to today. Jesus is calling us to follow in solidarity with him and with the world as we find greatness in how we welcome all people into the circle of God's love. We must welcome the weak, the unloved, the powerless, the voiceless, and the hurting into the center of God's community. We must wrap our arms around them and know that being in solidarity with them is what truly makes us great. What might it look like to expand our community's circle to include people on the margins? What if we realize that the way of Jesus

takes us to the borders of life and that the new center of our community resides at the edges because that is where the welcoming presence of God dwells? Who is welcome in our circle? Who is welcome? All of us.

Amen.