

A Children's Sermon for Adults

Mark 9:30-37

Even though this is not a Family Sunday, and the kids are enjoying their first day of a new Church School year, I've still got a Children's Sermon for today. Only this is a Children's Sermon...for adults.

You might not think so, but sometimes, the most challenging part of preparing a worship service is preparing the Children's Sermon. It's not like preaching to adults, who have a longer attention span than the youngsters who join me up here on Family Sundays. With kids, I know that I only have a narrow window of time to get my point across before I lose their interest. Come to think of it, maybe that's not the best example of what separates preaching to kids from preaching to grown-ups.

Something that *is* definitely different though, is that the adult mind is better equipped for making sense of abstract language that children only know how to take literally. Which a grandmother was reminded of when her granddaughter came for a visit. The little girl tipped her head back, opened her mouth wide enough to give her Nana clear view down past her tonsils, and asked, "Grammy, do you see it?" Not sure what it was she was supposed to be looking for, Granny tried to notice if there was a tooth missing or a new one growing in. Finally, the girl asked, "Do you see Jesus? They told me in church school that Jesus lives inside of me."

One way of explaining abstract ideas to young minds is by using familiar physical objects or experiences as illustrations. A child may not be able to explain what injustice is, but they can surely recognize it when someone gets twice as much ice cream as they do. Or when big sister gets to stay up and watch TV after they are told they have to go to bed. They might not be able to articulate a theology of grace, but they can appreciate the difference when they have done something wrong and are lovingly corrected instead of punished. Or when they are forgiven instead of rejected.

When a children's sermon revolves around a physical object, or an experience to which they can personally relate--that is known in the trade as an *object lesson*. Now and then, object lessons can also be necessary for getting a point across to grown-ups, too. In the Gospels, Jesus' attempts to teach the disciples spiritual truths often resemble an adult trying to explain to children lessons that exceed their level of comprehension.

If you were here last Sunday, or watched the service online, you might recall that the Gospel story was about Jesus warning the disciples that he would be betrayed and crucified. And that, anyone who wanted to be one of his disciples, would also face sacrifices and rejection. But, it's as if Jesus is trying to explain calculus to a kindergarten class. They just don't get it.

If you were here for *that* message, then this morning's reading might sound like a rerun of that episode. Jesus is still teaching the disciples about the sacrifice he would make for them. And that they should expect to face hard choices between following Jesus and taking a less difficult

road. The difficulty Jesus has been having getting that message across has led to them traveling incognito so that he can devote all his time to teaching them without interruptions from the crowds of people that were constantly seeking them out. But for all the time and effort Jesus had invested in helping them to understand, the report card still shows no progress. Mark's Gospel says that, "they did not understand what he was saying *and they were afraid to ask him!* Either they were embarrassed to admit how slow they could be or, they didn't really want to hear what he was saying.

One day, as they travelled through Galilee the disciples got into a heated debate with each other. Whatever they were discussing, they obviously intended to keep Jesus out of the conversation. They kept a safe distance from him, to keep him from overhearing what they were saying. When they all stopped for a rest, Jesus asked them what they were arguing about as they travelled. They were embarrassed to admit that what they had been arguing about was which one of them was the greatest disciple. They were comparing themselves to one another, bragging about who was the head of this class. Clearly, it was time for yet another lesson on humility.

When a Jewish rabbi of that time was teaching his disciples, he would sit and they would gather around him to listen. Kind of like our children's sermons on the chancel steps. Jesus sits down, and tells them, "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all ... and servant of all." How many times had he told them this already? And they were still stuck on which one of them was going to be the greatest! So, this time Jesus resorts to using what we today would call an object lesson to better make his point. In other words, a children's sermon, but a children's sermon for adults.

Ironically, the "object" he uses to illustrate the point he wants to make, is a *child*. Now, to understand the significance of this object lesson we need to realize that at that time and in that culture, children were, to some degree, looked at as exactly that ... objects. Something to be seen and not heard. To emphasize that point, Mark refers to the child as an "it". Children were loved, but they weren't esteemed like they are in our culture. They weren't granted a status anywhere near what children enjoy today. Until they matured into being productive members of the family they were as low in the household hierarchy as servants would be.

By making a child the focus of the lesson, Jesus wasn't making a point about how children should be more valued *than they are*. He was using the *lowliness of a child's status* as they are to demonstrate what makes for true greatness. Seeing Jesus, the one they believed to be the Messiah, declaring that welcoming a child like the one he placed before them was equal to welcoming Jesus himself painted a picture that even these "less than Honor Roll students" couldn't miss. THIS is what being first – this is what true greatness - looks like. The greatest among them would be whoever cares about the most vulnerable people, the ones who are treated as second rate, the ones nobody takes seriously, the ones who could never pay you back for what you did for them. Left to the realm of purely abstract ideas, Jesus' teaching about discipleship seemed to go right in one ear and out the other for these disciples. But, putting

skin and bones on those ideas brought them, and their implications for what discipleship truly means, into unmistakable clarity.

The world we live in still prizes greatness that is measured by achievement, power, prosperity, and fame. Perhaps we have labelled others as “great” based on those standards. Maybe we have aspired to that brand of greatness in our own lives. But we follow a Lord who never gives up on teaching us about a higher form of greatness. Who patiently corrects our backwards definitions of greatness by patiently reminding us that true greatness is not measured by the same standard that the world uses. The greatness that Christians are called to pursue is recognizable in traits like compassion, kindness, service, and generosity. Greatness as Jesus defines it, is identifiable by more than what it looks like. It is defined by whom it benefits. And that would be the least, the lost, the marginalized, the vilified and the forgotten.

If we need an object lesson to help us learn this lesson, the object we are given as our example, is Jesus himself. Jesus taught us what it looks like to give oneself utterly and completely, even when such self-sacrifice is undeserved. There are times when what Jesus wants to teach *us* about discipleship, may seem so beyond us, that it is as if *we* are children who are ill equipped to make sense of it. Maybe, we too need to have an object lesson if we are going to really understand.

So, if Jesus had a children’s message—an object lesson—for you, what would it look like? Who would come to mind for you when Jesus said “the least of these”? What person, or which population, is at the bottom of your priority list? I invite you to take a moment now, or later, to imagine Jesus holding that person, whoever they may be, in front of you. Then, hear Jesus saying to you, “whoever welcomes this person in my name ... welcomes me.”

Let this be our object lesson, to help us to comprehend, not in abstract ideas - but in flesh and blood realities the kind of greatness Jesus wants to inspire in you and in me.

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