

Psalm 1
Mark 9:30-37 (p. 45 NT)

St. John's Presbyterian Church
Devon, Pennsylvania
Victor M. Wilson, D.Min., Pastor

Twenty-fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time
September 20, 2009

AND THE LAST SHALL BE FIRST

He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them,
"Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all." (*Mark 9:35*)

Familiarity seems like a good thing to have with family, friends, and where you live. But familiarity also has a way of being challenged. I think of Jane's telling me a year ago how she consciously *chooses* to be toward the day, no matter how she feels. And how, about ten years ago Jane started composing short musical pieces that just knocked my socks off, and after twenty-five years of marriage I'm thinking, "Wow—where did that come from?" I think of Carolyn's extraordinary talents and industry wide accolades as a producer with National Geographic Channel. We had no idea a decade ago that she'd flower in that direction. I think of Katherine, who as a child seem to have the athletic talent and coordination of a grapefruit, yet turned into a national class rower, then cycled across the US with three young colleagues. Your own families must be the same.

Scripture can be a perilous place for those who assume familiarity, not least because we tend to read and hear it through twenty-first century lenses. Last Sunday offered a great example. Jesus asking the disciples who they thought he was, and Peter saying "You are the Messiah, the Christ." And we're thinking—good answer! Thirty seconds later Jesus fires a three-deck broadside out of the mist, accusing Peter of being the devil's disciple. And we're all left thinking, "Where did *that* come from?"

So, it's nice to have a text this week that seems to settle down a bit. One that's pretty self evident, wouldn't you say, showing Jesus' softer, human touch. He's just spent a lot of time in gentile territory, but now he's passing through Galilee. Maybe the disciples' confidence is rebuilding, after Jesus' last all-too memorable onslaught of Peter, and *them*. After all, they all thought Peter gave the right answer—he said Jesus was the Messiah. Unfortunately, he had the very wrong interpretation of what the messiah's role was. And interpretation is everything. Anyway, they were going home. Galilee was home, where the family would be waiting, a real bed to sleep in, and the first decent meal in weeks. So they get a bit carried away, arguing who among them is going to be the greatest. Probably ribbing Peter and saying, "Not you, buddy. Not after last week!" I can imagine them playfully mocking one another, pushing and tripping each other the way guys do. I know, ladies, boys will be boys—and so will some middle-age men. It was perfectly natural to have these discussions in that society about who was most important. They helped establish one's place so that everyone knew and could respect the pecking order of the group. One could say that Jesus even contributed to the sense of hierarchy, favoring Peter, James and John for especially sensitive missions. Like climbing the mountain of the transfiguration with him, or finding a donkey for the so-called "triumphal" entry into Jerusalem, or being the first three to learn about the second coming. And, being around Jesus, with all the popularity he has—his miraculous healings, his teachings—some of it's bound to rub off on them, elevating their status. The disciples are all equals socially, but Jesus—well that's a different story. He's up there. Social capital is king in Mediterranean cultures, so in Jesus' day. And the disciples are not above being caught up with a bit of social elevation. Noble birth was the best ticket to social rank. They don't have it themselves, but Jesus does. It seems not uncommon for people to refer to Jesus as "Son of David"—only the greatest king Israel ever had.

Capernaum was a small fishing town by Lake Galilee, and Jesus' has a house there, to which they now go. After greeting their families and leaving the dust of their travels in the refreshing waters of the lake, they gather in the house. Jesus sits, the formal role of the teacher. And when it gets quiet, I hear Jesus asking the disciples softly, "What were you arguing about, back there on the way?" Now they're embarrassed. They look at each other, like fifth graders hauled up before the principal. No one says anything. In this instance, silence is the voice of the delinquent. Jesus says, "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all" (Mark 9:35).

In that brief statement everything they know and have been taught about social relations in their culture is turned on its ear. It isn't just a radical statement. It's revolutionary! Becoming the least, the servant of all is Jesus in John 13, on the night of his betrayal washing Judas' feet before Judas leaves in the middle of supper to turn his master in to the authorities. It's Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus, two elders in the Jewish parliament, taking a condemned criminal down from the cross—the act of touching a dead body made them ceremonially unclean for a week!—and burying him in Joseph's private tomb. It's Jairus, a leader of the synagogue, coming to Jesus and falling at his feet asking him to heal his twelve year old daughter. It's the aged father of the prodigal son breaking from the patriarch's stately slowness and running to welcome his pig-feeder son home.

Then, things get *really* revolutionary. The disciples' families are now likely with them. And Jesus reaches for the hand of one among the very least in the social hierarchy—a child. It's so hard for us to make this mental switch. Especially in our culture's domestication of "gentle Jesus meek and mild," after Charles Wesley's old hymn. It isn't that children weren't loved by their families, they just had no status. Culturally, they were non-entities. They were not yet people, and had a long, even terrifying journey to make before they reached adulthood and their acceptance onto the first rung of the social ladder. Listen to these few extracts from Bruce Malina and Richard Rohrbaugh, two of the most respected social science authors in contemporary Christianity.

. . . Jesus notwithstanding, childhood in antiquity was a time of terror. Infant mortality rates sometimes reached 30 percent. Another 30 percent of live births were dead by age six, and 60 percent were gone by age 16. Children always suffered first from famine, war disease, and dislocation. . . . The orphan was the stereotype of the weakest and most vulnerable member of society. . . . survival to adulthood was a time of celebration (accompanied by appropriate rites of passage).

Children had little status within the community or family [because they could contribute little or nothing to the welfare of others]. A minor child was on a par with a slave, and only after reaching maturity was he or she a free person. . . . The term "child/children" could also be used as a serious insult.[see Matthew 11:16-17].

Once our mind gets hold of this point, and is willing to embrace the person for who they are as a child of God, with equal status in God's eyes to the emperor himself, we have embraced Christ, too. This is the meaning of the last verse: "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name," said Jesus, "welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me."

In *Call to Purpose: How Men Make Sense of Life-changing Experience*, Richard Solley writes of Jonathan, a volunteer in an AIDS clinic. He is massaging the feet of a patient named Robert, when suddenly, a moment of illumination occurs. Jonathan says:

I was still crouched down when suddenly it hit me that this man, Robert, was a child of God. I knew it sounded weird. Normally I would never say anything like that about somebody. . . . I was overwhelmed and felt that I was touching the body of a holy person. I was overcome by the holiness of his body, of the body itself, of his being, the holiness of my connection to him. I truly believed that he was a child of God. I was close to crying.

I had much the same experience on our mission trip to West Virginia, perhaps six years ago. We had a sublime evening worship service when the adults washed the feet of our young people. It was an extraordinary moment of epiphany for me that brought me to cherish and often use the verse from Genesis 1:26-27, where God as the last act of creation, turns to the council of heaven, and says, “Let us make humankind in our image, after our likeness . . . male and female God created them.”

Cashiering in a supermarket may not seem like a very rewarding position to most. But to me, it is. You see, I feel that my job consists of a lot more than ringing up the orders, taking people’s money, and bagging their groceries. The most important part of my job is not that obvious. Rather it’s the way in which I present myself to others that will determine whether my customers will leave the store feeling better or worse because of their brief encounter with me. For by doing my job well, I have a chance to do God’s work, too. Because of this, I try to make each of my customers feel special. While I’m serving them, they become the most important people in my life.

I think of Jesus asking nothing more or less than that. Maxine strikes me as one who simply *gets* this passage.

St. Augustine, in his classic *Confessions* 1,700 years ago, addresses God in what amounts to a prayer when he writes:

I aspired to honor, money, marriage, and you laughed at me. In those ambitions I suffered the bitterness of difficulties; that was by your mercy—so much the greater in that you gave me the less occasion to find sweet pleasure in what was not you. Look into my heart, Lord. In obedience to your will I recall this and confess to you. You detached me from the birdlime which held me fast in death. How unhappy I was! Your scalpel cut to the quick of the wound, so that I should leave all these ambitions and be converted to you, who are above all things, and without whom all things are nothing, and that by conversion I should be healed.

Here was the prayer of one internationally honored in his day, who chose to become first—a servant of God, who then gave to Augustine perhaps the most influential Christian mind to date, since St. Paul. Ironically, Augustine’s own conversion came when he heard a voice speaking to him from a garden, next to where he was sitting. The voice said, quite simply, “Take and read.” Read what, Augustine wondered? Then he saw a Bible close by, and what he read changed his life from that moment. Oh—and the voice that he heard, was the voice of a child.

Some time later in his journey he would read, “Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.” And he understood.

Amen.