

**September 23, 2018**  
**18th Sunday after Pentecost/ Proper 20 (Yr. B)**  
**Mark 9:30-37**  
**The Rev. Carenda Baker**

The lessons in Jesus' discipleship school continue for his band of twelve disciples, the "learners" he has called to make a life with him. After Peter declares Jesus to be the Messiah, Jesus has the first conversation with them about what will happen to him – arrest, trial, punishment, execution, and rising again. The disciples can't fathom it, can't take it in, cannot wrap their heads around what he is telling them. What Jesus describes sounds nothing like the Messiah they are expecting. Peter even rebukes Jesus for saying such things, and Jesus in turn calls Peter "Satan", declaring that Peter is focused only on human thoughts and not God's ways.

Six days later, Jesus treks up the mountain with Peter, James, and John. There Jesus is transfigured, his clothes become a dazzling white. Moses and Elijah appear, and talk with Jesus. Peter is overcome and doesn't know what to say. A cloud descends and from the cloud comes a voice, "This is my Son, the Beloved, listen to him." Back down the mountain and into the "real" world they go, where people need healing, some to be freed from spirits that possess them.

Picking up in today's gospel reading from Mark, Jesus for the second time teaches the disciples, trying to help them understand what will happen to him: betrayal, death, and rising again. They aren't getting it yet, and they're afraid to ask him any questions. It's probably easier to pretend that they get it, block it out altogether, and hope that the subject doesn't come up again. As they make their way from Galilee to Capernaum, they change the subject and talk about something more pleasant than the ominous predictions Jesus has been making.

As they make walk on their way to Capernaum, Jesus has heard the disciples talking amongst each other. When they arrive at Capernaum he asks, "What were you arguing about on the way?" If you've ever been caught by a teacher passing a note to someone in class, then you know how the disciples felt. No one responded to Jesus. They had been discussing which one of them was the greatest. The brightest. The bravest. The most loyal. The one most likely to succeed.

And Jesus' response? He doesn't chide, or scold or even discourage the disciples' focus on greatness. But he does seize that teaching moment and redefine their understanding of greatness. Jesus says greatness is about serving and welcoming.

To reinforce his point, Jesus gives them a living example. He brings a little child into their midst. Stands right in front of them, one who is at the very bottom of the social pecking order, dead last place. You have to welcome ones just like this one, says Jesus. Dependent, vulnerable, needy. Because when you welcome those like this child, you are welcoming me.

When I decided to go back to graduate school for a master's degree in social work, I told my counselor at the time that I thought I was being called to work with children. Very astutely she remarked, "You know, children are basically powerless. If you decide to work with children, you can expect frequently to feel their powerlessness." To be honest, I didn't like the sound of that too much. It gave me pause to reconsider. Did I want to sit with children in their powerlessness? I wanted to help them, somehow make their lives better. When I took a systems theory class in my first semester of graduate school, it was like a light bulb went on. Of course! If I really wanted to help bring change in a child's life, I would have to work with the larger system of which they were a part – their family, especially their parents. This was much more attractive and hopeful in my mind, to focus on strengths and possibilities, and the power for change present in the larger family system.

Many of us have a hard time going to that place of helplessness, need, and vulnerability to sit with a child. And in truth, we even have difficulty looking at, going to that needy and vulnerable place within ourselves.

In some cultures children are socially invisible and legally unprotected. In the first century household (both Jewish and Roman), children were seen as non-persons, or not-yet-persons, possessions of the father in the household. They represented the future—they would carry on the family name, provide for their aging parents, and produce the next generation. But in the present, they were a liability. Small children, especially, were more likely to contract an illness and to die. They participated in the household labor, but were not yet fully productive, and still represented another mouth to feed. Children could do nothing to enhance one's social position in terms of prestige or influence. Children offered nothing with which one could curry favor from another. Yet these "useless" ones are the ones Jesus says we are to welcome.

So then, we face here a significant quandary. Human beings, and I think especially those of us who live in the United States, live caught between two opposing narratives about what makes for *GREATNESS*. There are an infinite number of ways we measure human achievement, and we most certainly want to be able to measure it. If we can't measure "*it*", whatever "*it*" is – wealth, celebrity, knowledge, military might, achievement in the arts or sciences or sports, how many "likes" our FB page or responses our Twitter

feed gets – if we can't measure these things, then we have no way of making comparisons. And isn't that what greatness is about – making comparisons? SOMEBODY has to be fastest, smartest, richest, brightest, strongest, most valuable player etc. Where would we be without our Emmy and Oscar nominations, Kennedy Center awards, baseball and football Halls of Fame, musical and artistic creators and geniuses, Nobel prize winners, Olympic champions?

We live with this constant tension between those two poles: grabbing on and hanging on to the good and best things in life, the things for which we are noticed, the things we achieve, the influence that we have on others, AND at the other end: the upside-down way of living that Jesus modeled and taught. In God's kingdom, greatness is measured in serving, in giving love away to those most in need of it – the littlest, weakest, most vulnerable, undesirable, easily forgotten ones. Those least expecting to receive love and attention. Those who have nothing to give in return, no way to repay what they have received. The silent ones on the margins we don't even notice.

The sticking point is that greatness in the kingdom of God is not about grabbing on, and holding on to those things we prize. It is about letting go of self-concern, self-promotion, self-protection, self-absorption. It is about cooperating with God's Spirit so that self can be moved out of the way to allow God's love to flow more freely through us. Here then was the disciples' dilemma, and is our dilemma. This letting go requires dying to self – dying to the fears and illusions that bind and constrict our hearts and spirits. Letting go of those things that prevent our experiencing the goodness, richness, and abundance of God's reign of love. Dying by turning over to God our stunted imaginations. Our being stuck in ruts of thought and behavior that do not bring life, energy, meaning, purpose and joy to our hearts. Dying is necessary to make way for new life.

Nick Vujcic, in his book "Life Without Limits", tells the story of a beautiful and memorable encounter, the most sensitive embrace he ever experienced. Born without arms and legs, Nick had become an inspirational writer and speaker. One day at a public social event, a small girl was introduced to him and she was encouraged to give him a hug. She drew back in fear. Nick understood. As various other people came and greeted him, the little girl noticed how he treated each one. Eventually she decided to embrace Nick herself. Drawing near him, she stopped, then put both arms behind her back and embraced Nick in the manner by which he embraced others, putting her chin over his shoulder and hugging him close with it. This small child saw Nick's position in life, and met him right where he was, in his vulnerability, and she in her vulnerability in the place that looked like "weakness", a place "less than" whole or perfect. This little girl learned how to truly welcome this man who was different.

Maya Angelou once said: "I've learned that people will forget what you said. People will forget what you did. But people will never forget how you made them feel."

Being aware of how we make people feel is part of welcoming others as if we were welcoming Jesus himself. Jean Vanier is a Canadian Catholic philosopher, theologian and humanitarian who in 1964 founded L'Arche, an international federation of communities, which have spread to over 37 countries for people with developmental disabilities and those who assist them. Vanier's guiding philosophy is that people with disabilities are teachers rather than burdens bestowed upon their families.

In 1968, Jean Vanier gave an initial Faith and Sharing retreat in Mary Lake, Ontario, the first in his movement of annual retreats and days of prayer where people from many walks of life are welcome. Faith and Sharing member Bill Clark, SJ, describes the spirit of these retreats: "There is a two-fold movement in Faith and Sharing: an inward movement towards God hidden in the depths of our own vulnerability, and an outward movement towards our brothers and sisters, especially those who are more poor and in need."

"Vanier believes and teaches that what the poor, the weak and the disabled require of us is not so much to do things for them. It is not so much to sacrifice on their behalf but to invite them to sit at the same table with us."

To be great in God's realm, one must be willing to take the last and lowest place, the place of being a servant to others, and there to welcome the least as we would welcome Jesus himself. Greatness is found as we offer Jesus' wide and loving welcome to all. Greatness is found not in climbing up, but in coming down to sit next to the weakest and most easily overlooked. Those who are great in God's realm see that in entering the vulnerability of others, our need and longing for the touch of Christ, the servant Savior, is met and satisfied, too. This is the beauty, goodness and mystery of God: We are being served, even as we serve.

To help us learn to love and serve in the same self-giving way Jesus did, try offering these three great, simple prayers: "Lord help us. Lord have mercy. Thanks be to God." May these great prayers prepare us to approach the table of the Lord, with joy and gladness. Amen.