

**September 20, 2015**  
**17th Sunday after Pentecost**  
**Mark 9:30-37**  
**The Rev. Carenda Baker**

It is a bit of a mystery to me how often one or more of the assigned lectionary readings for Sunday turns out to be incredibly appropriate for a particular season in the life of a congregation, or pertinent to current events happening in the world. That is the case with today's gospel reading. I cannot think of a better passage for us to reflect on together as a parish and new rector, at the beginning of a life of shared ministry. The gospel gives us a picture that can serve as a touchstone to which we can return again and again to help guide our understanding of what it means to be disciples of Jesus in mission and ministry to the world.

***“What were you arguing about on the way?”*** Jesus asks the disciples, as they come into Capernaum. Now which one of them do you think is going to be brave enough to admit to Jesus what they were all preoccupied with discussing? They were talking about which one of them was going to be the greatest, which one would be named MVD – “Most Valuable Disciple”. Truth be told, they were discussing what we, too, often spend a lot of time thinking about – our own position, reputation, honor, achievement, and recognition – our own self-interests. It is time once again for some serious teaching, and Jesus gathers them around to provide an object lesson.

***“Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.”*** And then comes the object lesson as Jesus brings a young child into their midst, and talks about what life in God's kingdom looks like.

Children occupied an interesting place in the 1<sup>st</sup> century household, for both Jews and Romans. 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 die. They participated in the household labor, but were not yet fully productive, and still represented another mouth to feed. Many historians of this time period compare the status of children to that of a slave. . . .Children were insiders left on the outside. And in Mark's gospel, Jesus doesn't say become like a child. He says, “Welcome the child.”

Jesus' object lesson reaches far beyond the issue of welcoming children as a vital part of society and the church, important as that is. The child that Jesus brings into their midst is the representative, the prime example, the ultimate stand-in for the weak, vulnerable, easily hurt, and broken ones living on the margins of life, the ones with no power, position, prestige, or ability to repay anything done for them. It is not so much a question of who is great and who is not, but instead it is a question of welcome. 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 shows deep grace, compassion, love, honor, and hospitality. Greatness is not about glory and making a name for one's self. Greatness is about serving others.

One of the most well-known spiritual teachers and authors of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was Henri Nouwen, a Roman Catholic priest who taught at Notre Dame, Yale, and Harvard, and was much in demand as a speaker and retreat leader. Despite all his fame and notoriety, his frequent travels and prolific writing, he was restless in his later years and still searching for something to provide deeper meaning in his life. He did not know it at the time, but he was looking for a community to serve. He was invited by Jean Vanier, founder of the L'Arche community in Toronto, to go live with and serve as priest for one of the L'Arche community group homes for physically handicapped and mentally challenged people. In his book "Life of the Beloved", Nouwen recounts an incident with one of the residents of that community. Her name was Janet, and one day she asked Henri for a blessing. He sort of perfunctorily made the sign of the cross on Janet's forehead. She protested vehemently and said, "No, that doesn't work. I want a real blessing." He didn't know exactly what she wanted, but he told her he would give her a real blessing when they met for prayer service in the group home later that day. So when about thirty of them were sitting in a circle on the floor for their prayer service, Henri started out by saying that Janet had asked him for a special blessing, because she needed that right now. He still didn't know what Janet wanted, but she didn't leave him in doubt for long. As soon as Henri told the group Janet had asked for a special blessing, she stood up and walked toward him. He was wearing an alb with big, roomy sleeves. She put her arms around Henri and rested her head against his chest. Nouwen says: "Without thinking, I covered her with my sleeves so that she almost disappeared in the folds of my robe. As we held each other, I said, 'Janet, I want you to know that you are God's Beloved Daughter. You are precious in God's eyes. Your beautiful smile, your kindness to the people in your house and all the good things you do show us what a beautiful human being you are. I know you feel a little low these days and that there is some sadness in your heart, but I want you to remember who you are: a very special person, deeply loved by God and all the people who are here with you.'"

Janet raised her head and looked at Henri. Her broad smile showed him that she had really heard and received the blessing. When Janet returned to her seat, another resident Jane, and then gradually another and another – many of the physically and mentally challenged people living there - expressed that same desire to be blessed.

Nouwen says: "We need an ongoing blessing that allows us to hear in an ever-new way that we belong to a loving God who will never leave us alone, but will remind us always that we are guided by Divine love on every step of our lives." (from Life of the Beloved, Henri Nouwen).

Servants. We are called to be servants, servants who bless others in Jesus' name, because we have been first blessed by God. Our lives are to be a mirror not of our own wants and desires, but a reflection to others of what Jesus has done for us. We are called to become servants because we have first been served by Jesus in his life, death and resurrection. Serving is what the life of the kingdom is all about. I have been delighted to learn, and I believe God is pleased by the fact that this parish is taking seriously God's call to be servants of radical hospitality. I certainly don't yet know all the places where this is being lived out in the parish's life and ministry, but I do know this is part of the passion that drives the weekly Thursday community breakfast that is offered in Trinity's parish hall. I also know there are

persons with special needs who are part of this congregation, and there is some hope for greater inclusion and participation for those persons and their families. I believe there exists here a desire to serve and extend radical welcome to those who are searching for God, and longing for a safe, welcoming Christian faith community, perhaps after having experienced hurt and rejection from other denominational expressions of the Church. There is also, I think, a growing curiosity about who our neighbors are in this immediate vicinity, neighbors who we are called to get to know better, welcome, and serve.

What then, is to be our response to the radical welcome and honor we have received from God through Jesus' death and resurrection? It is to mirror that hospitality, grace, and love out there, beyond Trinity Church's doors - every day of the week. And it is to hold each other accountable to live it here in our common life and care of each other.

I pledge to you, as we begin this journey as priest and dear faithful ones of Trinity, that I will daily readily turn to God for mercy, strength, wisdom, patience, love and understanding as we serve together. I will be fervent in prayer and ask you to join me in that discipline. It is not easy to live out in our world the radical welcome and love we have received in Christ. We will need each other for support and encouragement. Each of us will need to grow more deeply in our own relationship with the GOD WHO IS LOVE. We will need to practice dependence on God's wise and guiding Spirit. We will need to reach out to experience healing so that we can share the healing touch of Christ with others. We will need to return again and again to the Lord's Table to be served by Christ so that we can become more fully Christ's hands and feet in the world. This mutual ministry we now take up together is all about faithfulness – God's unfailing faithfulness to us, and the faithfulness with which we will mirror the self-giving, serving love of Christ to all whom we meet outside these doors. We have received the unconditional loving embrace of God in Christ. It is an embrace that transforms and brings new and rich life, full of hope and meaning, a life freed from fear. It is a love that has no bounds and prompts us to open the circle wide to draw others in to share what we have experienced of new and unending life in Christ.

In closing, I offer on our behalf a prayer from The Book of Common Prayer titled, "A Prayer of Self-Dedication".

Let us pray:

"Almighty and eternal God, so draw our hearts to you, so guide our minds, so fill our imaginations, so control our wills, that we may be wholly yours, utterly dedicated unto you, and then use us, we pray, as you will, and always to your glory and the welfare of your people; through our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen".