

Mark 9:30-37

Preached for Stone Church of Willow Glen via Zoom by Rev. Samantha Evans

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Letting the “Least” Lead

Have you ever told your child or student or anyone under your care or supervision: “Because I said so!”?

My younger brothers will tell you that this was my most constant refrain growing up. I was the eldest and the head of the household when my parents were at work. And my, oh my, was that a power trip! I lorded over my brothers like a ruthless dictator. Insisting they did whatever I told them to do. Because I knew better. I was in charge. I was teaching them what was right and how to be good.

I also loved them very much and could sometimes be very sweet. The fact that they still love me and want me in their lives tells me that I wasn’t a total terror. But the fact remains, that I rarely listened to them, always knew what was good for them, and forced or coerced them to abide by my rule.

Now, I was 14, so give me a break, I’ve grown since then. AND also, as I imagine what kind of parent I might be, I acknowledge that there’s certainly still this authoritarian drive within me. I am just hoping that since I am much more self-aware, I will be better at regulating this.

More willing to listen, to hear the needs of the children, and respond with compassion and insight, rather than an iron fist and a “because I said so” attitude. Note: this is aspirational.

My hunch is that this is also an aspiration for all the parents out there, and for those who have worked with or who care for children. AND also, I imagine that your ability to live into this aspiration very much depends on how much sleep you got, whether you ate, what’s going on at work or with your extended family.

I imagine you would always love to really hear your children and respond lovingly to their needs. And also, sometimes they just need to eat their dinner, play quietly while others are sleeping, and for goodness sake, leave you alone while you go to the bathroom.

We aspire to listen deeply, and sometimes we just can’t help but declare: Because I said so!

And when it comes to children under our care, sometimes we do actually know what is best for them and it is actually our job to protect them from harm.

So the metaphor breaks down a bit here, because what I want to suggest to y'all today is that when Jesus tells his disciples to be last of all, to be servant to all, that to welcome children is to welcome him, he is teaching them to let the "least" of these lead.

It is not the disciples' job, nor our job, to tell anyone who is marginalized or deemed "lesser" by societies' standards that we know better, that they should do what we say because we say so. It is our job to welcome, to listen, and to let the "least" lead.

One of the most prevailing themes in the gospel of Mark is just how absurdly and consistently the disciples get it wrong. At every turn, the disciples fail to understand what Jesus is trying to teach them. They fail to understand what is happening right before their eyes. They fail to understand what it all means and what God is calling them to do.

It's almost like slapstick comedy, where everything goes wrong and the calamity just keeps escalating. Think the Three Stooges. It's like the disciples in the gospel of Mark are the twelve stooges, constantly interrupting, missing the point, and getting metaphorically bonked over the head by Jesus.

I don't know about y'all, but this kind of comedy is actually pretty cringeworthy to me. I don't like watching it because it's so obviously exaggerated and frustrating. I often find myself yelling at the characters to just get it together. The answer is so obvious.

That's exactly how I feel reading about how the disciples react to Jesus' teachings, especially today's text. Jesus has been telling them about the suffering and violence he is about to face, and they clearly don't understand and are afraid to ask him about it. Which I can understand. It's a sensitive topic. But you would think that they would at least talk about it amongst themselves and try to understand it. Maybe make a plan to talk to Jesus about it. Go to him and say, we've been trying to work this out, but we need some help.

Instead, they debate literally the opposite of what he is teaching. In response to Jesus telling them about his death, they decide to debate who is greatest among them. It's so absurd, so obvious, it just has to be comedic satire.

And then again, comedy only works when it actually describes reality. And I think if we're really honest with ourselves, the disciples' shortcomings and idiocy are

perhaps only obvious because we're looking upon them from the outside. We have the benefit of hindsight, and also, the benefit of receiving a narrative that has been carefully crafted to show us the tension that will always arise when any seek to follow Jesus.

The disciples are not alone in misunderstanding who Jesus is and what Jesus calls his followers to do.

The historical church has gotten this wrong over and over again. Faithful Christians of every generation, including ours, have failed to fully grasp what it means to follow Christ.

Many have come to this text and its parallels found in the other gospels, and they have gone away with an overly sentimental understanding of welcome and a patronizing view of service.

And by this, I mean that we think it's okay to "welcome" someone, but expect them to assimilate rather than make space for their gifts and faithfully steward their offerings.

Mary Jo's sermon was perfect. Telling us about children who are leading the charge on some of the most important issues of our day. Welcoming them as we welcome Jesus actually means following them as we follow Jesus.

And it's important to note that in Jesus' time, children were non-persons. They were the least of the least. And Jesus is telling his disciples to welcome them—listen to them, follow them, follow their lead, and serve their dreams—for this is what means to be truly faithful, this is what it means to welcome Jesus, and to welcome God.

One of my all-time favorite, life-forming quotes comes from an Aboriginal Rights group in Queensland, Australia, which was famously stated by indigenous activist, Lilla Watson, who said: "If you have come here to help me, you are wasting your time. But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together."

"If you have come to help me..." which for many generations has been the stated motive of evangelists and colonialists. It is a patriarchal, patronizing way to see people who are different from you. In this approach, "service" becomes the notion that we, the haves, must give something to the have-nots. And if they could just receive our wisdom, our gifts, what we have, then all would be well for them, and most importantly, we will feel better.

This isn't how it works, my friends. You see, this top-down approach only furthers the inequality and the injustice, which endemic to our society.

Instead, we are called to a place of solidarity, a place where we discover that our liberation from systems of oppression will require collaboration among those who are oppressed by the systems and those who maintain or are rewarded by those same systems.

But my friends, if we take Jesus' words seriously, then those voices do not bear equal weight in the direction of the movement of change.

Likewise, one of the principles in community organizing is to elevate the voices of those closest to the pain, those most negatively affected by a system or law or policy. These are the ones who should be leading the movement.

Not "helped," but followed, or at the very least walking side by side.

So practically, what this means for us today, is that if we seek to do justice work, we shall begin by listening to the needs of the people experiencing injustice. We can't sit with our friends on in our committees and decide what people need and how we can help them.

So if we are talking about dismantling racism and white supremacy, then we have to start by listening to Black people. For they have been closest to the pain since before the founding of this nation. We cannot begin to imagine a more just system when we are unable to fully grasp the injustice that our system was built upon. We have to listen to the stories, the experiences, the dreams of Black people, and then follow them wherever they lead.

If we are talking about poverty and homelessness, then we have to start by listening to those who are experiencing it. We cannot simply presume to know what they need or what will disrupt the cycle of economic inequality. We begin by listening to them, hearing how they got where they are and where they hope to be. And then following them wherever they lead.

If we are talking about immigration, we start by listening to those who have displaced by violence and war, those seeking a better life for themselves and their families, those who dream of safety and joy, but have been forgotten and discarded. We have to listen to them, welcome them, make space for them, and follow them wherever they lead.

I could go on and on, but I trust you get the point.

To welcome someone means to make space for them, to listen to them, and ultimately to follow them. For in doing so, we will be welcoming Jesus and following him down the path that ultimately leads to true liberation for all peoples. The path that leads to true justice and peace, love and joy. The path the leads to God.

“If you have come here to help me, you are wasting your time. But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together.”

In the name of the Triune God, who Creates, Sustains, and Redeems us all. Amen.