

A SERMON PREACHED AT BETHANY  
BEACH CHRISTIAN CHURCH,  
BETHANY BEACH, DE, ON SUNDAY,  
SEPTEMBER 16, 2018

A couple had two little boys, ages 8 and 10, who were excessively mischievous. The two were always getting into trouble and their parents could be assured that if any mischief occurred in their town their two young sons were in some way involved.

The parents were at their wits end as to what to do about their sons' behavior. The mother had heard that a clergyman in town had been successful in disciplining children in the past, so she asked her husband if he thought they

should send the boys to speak with the clergyman.

The husband said, 'We might as well. We need to do something before I really lose my temper!' The clergyman agreed to speak with the boys, but asked to see them individually. The 8 year old went to meet with him first. The clergyman sat the boy down and asked him sternly, 'Where is God?'

The boy made no response, so the clergyman repeated the question in an even sterner tone, 'Where is God?' Again the boy made no attempt to answer. So the clergyman raised his voice even more and shook his finger in the boy's

face, 'WHERE IS GOD?'

At that the boy bolted from the room and ran directly home, slamming himself in the closet. His older brother followed him into the closet and asked what had happened. The younger brother replied, 'We are in BIG trouble this time. God is missing and they think we did it!'"

Ah, the wisdom of children, especially where it relates to God! In this morning's gospel lesson, Jesus uses a variety of tactics to relate to his disciples regarding his life and the life to come. It is not a new move - - he has used it before - - but this time he uses one solitary child for his analogy about the kingdom of heaven and what one must

do to enter it. The disciples had been arguing amongst themselves on their way to Capernaum about who was the greatest, much like little children do in a kind of “king of the hill.” Jesus no doubt found this both amusing and annoying. How often had he heard this kind of discussion? One can only imagine the banter, and the jostling for position, especially with the likes of the “favorites,” Peter, James, and John. One can imagine Judas seething with envy, while some of the more quiet types like Phillip, Andrew, and Thomas wondering what was going on and how they could be part of the discussion. Jude and James and Bartholomew were probably lost altogether. In their midst he places

a child as an example of how people should follow him, both humbly and with simple faith. He tries to demonstrate to the disciples not that they need to act like children, so much as to accept and have faith in him *like* a child. That is a lesson for us. The key to the beloved community of God, what we call the kingdom of heaven, is simple, humble faith. As much as we try to whoop it all up with magnificent acts for God and the community in which we live, a more honorable approach is preferable. That is why the works of prayer of the monastic communities—monks and nuns of various churches - - is so important. They do not present the only way to be in dialogue with God, but

they do seem to have one sure way to do so.

Now let's get to another important point of how one gets to be first among many. Sitting down, Jesus called the Twelve and said, "Anyone who wants to be first must be the very last, and the servant of all." This could not have been pleasing to hear. The disciples were always thinking in earthly-power terms, kings and soldiers and seats at the table and the like. James and John were caught arguing on one occasion about who was the greatest. Their mother even intervened to ask Jesus to settle the argument, to which Jesus replied, as

he does in this gospel, with a warning that if one wants to be first in God's kingdom, one must settle for last. How can that be right? How could that be correct? All the work of servanthood and it still ends up that one is a servant. Is that fair? That's undoubtedly where we find our objections. We comment when a faithful churchgoer leaves us that now they can rest in peace. That is to say, rest from all that they did in this life that we hope will put them in good stead for the next. But what if all we did in this life is just a presaging, a foreshadowing of what is to come in the next? What if what lies ahead in eternal

life is an endless time of work where we strive through our remembered example to bring others into the kingdom? What if the prayers we offer for the dead are merely a reminder of what we have yet to accomplish in this life? We are told that we pray for the dead because we still hold them in our love, and because we trust that in God's presence those who have chosen to serve God will grow in God's love until they see God as God is.<sup>i</sup> So there is still a servanthood component going on here. Even in the life eternal, of which we are part now, have begun now, we are called to serve



one another and God. But what does that mean? How do we serve others? Here we enter the realm of television evangelism as these are frequent questions borne of their ministries. The Mormon Church also spends a lot of time trying to answer these questions for its members. Should they also be questions for consideration by members of the Disciples of Christ? One thing that seems certain is that we serve God by serving others. We all know how to serve others; there are hundreds of ways, from taking a meal to a sick friend to offering a ride to a sick fellow congregant to sending a get well card to

someone who is ill. All these actions serve others but they also serve God because they care for God's children in ways God would and does.

But what about this rule that if you want to be first you must go to the end of the line? This portion of *The Gospel of Mark* is on the list of *Top Ten Jesus Quotes That Some Christians Wish Never Existed*,<sup>ii</sup> (the only one in *Mark*) presumably because it is hard to take in and live with. This is what is known as one of Jesus' Grand Reversals. The Beatitudes were a series of reversals. Jesus told a story in which the last hired becomes the first paid. The cross, of course, is the ultimate reversal. Who could imagine that Jesus could save the

world by dying a particularly heinous death?

Jesus stands conventional wisdom on its head—reversing first and last—emphasizing servanthood. He doesn't tell us that ambition is bad, but rather that one's ambitions are best directed to serving others rather than self. The truly great person is a *diakonos*—a deacon—a servant—a person who spends his/her days taking care of other people.

Diakonos is a humble role, and we have to wonder whether Jesus is telling the truth when he says that being a servant is great—but we have seen evidence that he means what he says.<sup>iii</sup> When we look at the Mother Teresas and Father Damians of the world, they were great

people, no doubt. But were they greater than the little-known fire-chief that spent 45 years on the line fighting California forest fires? Or the thousands of heroes who showed their mettle on September 11, 2001? They are the ones, along with Teresa and Demien, who deserve a place at the front of the line, wherever it begins in the kingdom.

I think that were Jesus around today, in a more inclusive move regarding first and last, he would consider a more circular approach with no beginning or end; we'd merely join the circle of the kingdom wherever we walk into it. It's what is being called in today's theology "arounders." Perhaps that is how we will all take our place at the table.

However we understand first and last and the little child we are to emulate to be part and parcel of God's beloved community, the biblical commentator Richard Neill Donovan writes concerning this gospel text, "The church has been greatly affected by this passage. It has fed the hungry, housed the homeless, cared for orphans, provided medical care to the sick, taught people to read, and met many other basic needs. The church has loved the helpless and the hopeless. However, the church needs to be constantly reminded of Jesus' call to welcome 'little ones.' We are tempted to curry the favor of the wealthy and powerful in the hope that they will fund our ministry or smooth our pathways.

We are tempted to take our ministry to beautiful people and to ignore the unlovely. We are tempted to build churches in the suburbs and to ignore the inner city. We are tempted to covet titles such as ‘influential church’ and ‘prominent church leader.’ If the original disciples needed to repent for arguing among themselves who was the greatest, we also need to repent.”<sup>iv</sup>

And repent we will should we care to enter the kingdom. I’m not sure that like with most religious things we spend a lot of any time worrying about anything I’ve raised today. But I hope we can be encouraged to put some of it into our consciousness so that our lives and

those around us will be bettered. Lord knows we could all use a hand, even if it be that of a child, the humble, or the least among us.

Amen.

(The Rev. Dr.) Rayner W. Hesse, Jr.  
Pastor, BBCC

---

<sup>i</sup> Book of Common Prayer 1979, p. 862

<sup>ii</sup> <https://christlikemedia.com/jesus-quotes/>

<sup>iii</sup> <https://www.sermonwriter.com/biblical-commentary/mark-930-37/>

<sup>iv</sup> *Ibid.*