

29 September 2019

Counter-Cultural Importance

Mark 9:33-37; 10:13-16

Today we read two episodes from the Gospel of Mark. First, in chapter 9, we find Jesus and his disciples traveling. We read verses 33-37:

³³Then they came to Capernaum; and when he was in the house he asked them, ‘What were you arguing about on the way?’ ³⁴But they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another about who was the greatest. ³⁵He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, ‘Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.’ ³⁶Then he took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms, he said to them, ³⁷‘Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.’

We now read from the next chapter of the Gospel of Mark, chapter 10, verses 13-16.

¹³People were bringing little children to him in order that he might touch them; and the disciples spoke sternly to them. ¹⁴But when Jesus saw this, he was indignant and said to them, ‘Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. ¹⁵Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it.’ ¹⁶And he took them up in his arms, laid his hands on them, and blessed them.

I want to start today with an exercise, and I need your help. I’m going to say a word, and then I want you to hold on to the first picture that comes into your mind at that word. Are you ready? VIP – Very Important Person. All right, what did you picture? What does a VIP look like?

[Responses: At first, someone said “wealthy” and when I asked what a wealthy person looked like, one person called out “a white guy in a suit”! Several affirmed that impression, but as time passed, people began to vary their responses. One said, “my father,” and another (director of a choir for people with dementia) said, “my choir.”]

So did you notice how the responses changed? Our *first* impression was the “white guy in a suit” thing, but after a while some of us began to recognize that that person, despite appearances, might not be as important as all that. Parents and teachers are way more important than CEOs. Our conscious, rational minds know that. We know there things more important than power and wealth and influence. But beneath that rational level, there are unconscious lessons that we don’t so much learn as *absorb* from our culture, and that’s what popped into your mind in that first picture, isn’t it?

This isn’t a new thing, and it’s not just American. It’s a human tendency. We have always automatically associated “importance” with wealth and power and influence. That’s what Jesus’ disciples were arguing about on the road in Mark 9: who was going to have the highest and most influential position once Jesus drove out the Romans and became king of Israel. And how did

Jesus respond to this? First, I'm guessing, with a deep sigh. Then he said, "Look, if you want to be first in my kingdom, practice being last. You know who's important to me? People who serve others." Then he called a child over and added, "*Particularly* those who serve people like this: vulnerable people."

Then we have our second reading, the familiar story of Jesus and the children. People are bringing children to Jesus, asking him to bless them, and he's doing it. And his disciples step in and try to break it up, "All right, all right, that's enough of that! Ma'am can you take your child back, please? No more kids today."

Let's do another exercise. Why do you suppose the disciples did that? Why did they try to send the parents and children away?

[Responses: "They were a nuisance" and other ways to phrase that. But why were they a nuisance? One said, "They couldn't do anything, couldn't vote or anything." and then one lady said clearly, "They weren't important." We discussed that, agreeing that if it had been a wealthy man who was disrupting Jesus' schedule, the disciples would have been fine with it, but children don't have anything to give back. They can't lead an army or chair a meeting or give money.]

And what did Jesus say? "What in Sheol do you think you're doing? Did I ask you to send the kids away? Get out of their way. Now!" and then he went back to picking up children and blessing them. In other words, he set about demonstrating *exactly what he had just taught them in chapter 9*. You want to know who's important? Weak, vulnerable people and those who care for them. Like this. Watch.

And it's not just Jesus who teaches this; it's the entire Bible. Exodus 3 introduces God as "the one who hears the cry of the oppressed." Over and over, God is described as the one who brings down the mighty and raises up the lowly – in 1 Samuel 2 (in the Song of Hannah), in Psalm 75 and 107 among others, in Isaiah 61, in Luke 2 (in the Song of Mary). And Jesus opens his own ministry by saying that the Spirit was on him to bring good news to the poor, to captives, to the blind, and to the oppressed. Our Bible is a vast book, containing a lot of different perspectives, but if there is one theme that runs through the entire thing, this is it. God cares about the underdog: the last, the least, the lowest, the lost, the overlooked. This is 100% consistent in scripture. And it is 100% in opposition to the usual values of human society. When it comes to the question of who matters the most, Christ is not just counter-cultural; Christ is the exact opposite, the photographic negative, of cultural.

So how about the church? Have we reflected the values of Christ or the values of human culture? Well, we've had our good moments. The early church first drew the attention of its neighbors by taking in widows and abandoned babies and by staying to treat the sick during outbreaks of plague. And we should mention St. Francis of Assisi, who devoted himself to the lowest of society, and Father Damien who gave his life caring for lepers, and St. Theresa of Calcutta. And . . . um . . . John Wesley did pretty good. I should mention him. Probably some others. Not coming to mind just now, though. Other than that, though, not great. As a whole, the church is better known for becoming wealthy and influential and then doing everything it could

to maintain that power, including crusades, inquisitions, finding biblical excuses for slavery and genocide, and covering up child sexual abuse. Not so much about caring for the vulnerable.

This week I'll be spending three days at a pastor's conference. Sometimes these are good, and I hope this one is one of those. Usually they leave me angry and depressed and wondering if the church has ever heard of Jesus. Like the one earlier this year on techniques for getting more money from your congregation and attracting wealthy people to your church. Jesus' values or cultural values? Which do you think? Or the one a few years ago on how to start churches in rich suburbs. (We were encouraged to join the local country club, because that's where the best prospects are.) Or the leadership conference I went to once where I was told to use the 80-20 rule: spend at least 80% of my time with people who have the gifts and resources to help your church and no more than 20% of my time to losers who have nothing useful to offer. I am not making that up. Again, does this reflect Jesus' values? Yes? No? What do you think? One day that Church leadership guru will stand before the Jesus of Mark 9 and 10. God help him.

Here's what the church of that Jesus might look like. It would be a church where children are more important than adults. It would be made up of people that are more excited to welcome a drug addict than a CEO, a church where people with disabilities or mental illness are just people, a church for people who can't tithe, a church whose heroes are people who sit for hours at a time in nursing homes, singing hymns and holding the hands of residents with advanced dementia. It would be a church that charts its 5-year plan based on who is being left behind in society, and that's all.

And here's something I need you to hear. I have spent my entire life in church – at least a dozen different churches in my memory – and of all the churches I have known, this church comes closer to that picture than any other. When I tell people that I love my appointment to this church, I'm not being polite. I mean it. It is a privilege to serve among you. But that doesn't mean we've arrived. Frankly, "Better than any other church I've known" isn't setting the bar all that high. We can do even better. Let us dream together about who we have yet to touch with love.

So who's a VIP in this mirror-image Kingdom of God? The crying child in the back pew. The person who needs an arm to hold on to up the stairs. The person who can't hear without a hearing device. The person who needs pictures to follow along in worship. The person who can't eat sugar or wheat or green vegetables. The person who is grieving. The person with aphasia. The person who is frightened and doesn't know where else to turn. These people are important, and the people who make this the church of Jesus Christ are the ones who know that.