

Pentecost B17 2015
September 20
Central Presbyterian Church
David Noble
Mark 9:30-37

³⁰*They went on from there and passed through Galilee. He did not want anyone to know it; ³¹for he was teaching his disciples, saying to them, “The Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him, and three days after being killed, he will rise again.” ³²But they did not understand what he was saying and were **afraid** to ask him.*

³³*Then 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 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.”*

A

All he said was, “Remember the little people.” It seemed appropriate coming from him. After all, he had met many *little people* in his day and as a journalist had interviewed who knows how many of them for stories big and small. Many of them were unknown, unremarkable folks who just lived day to day. He wanted to know what made them tick, what their struggles were, what their victories were like. He saw the realities that many of us never see and may not even know exist. But he saw them and reported them.

On the other hand, it was also true that he had rubbed shoulders with many big, important people, too –folks who had seen the world and enjoyed lives of notoriety. When I met him he was the interim bureau chief for the Associated Press. When Hurricane Katrina devastated New Orleans and the AP staff fled for their lives, he was sent in to get a new office up and running until proper quarters could be acquired. When bureau chiefs resigned or retired he was the one who moved in to keep the operation running. He had done this sort of interim work all over the world, quietly restoring non-functioning bureaus or bridging the gaps between departed and incoming chiefs.

“Remember the little people” were his words to me after a session meeting where once again his quiet leadership had generated a sensible path of compromise. He was the elder you could count on to remove his ego from the situation, listen to all sides, and propose a way forward that had integrity. He was probably the best natural politician at the table. Surrounded there by captains of industry and community leaders who loved to hear their own voices, he seldom spoke. And he glided along under the radar, never attracting attention.

In my Bible, I imagine his picture nestled next to this story from Mark's gospel. In this account, Jesus actually does pick up a little person, a child, and presents him to the disciples who have been arguing about who is the greatest.

B

No matter what culture or which century, children have always been among the most vulnerable.

Around the world today, 9 million children die each year before their 5th birthday. Children are vulnerable to malnutrition, dirty drinking water, and non-existent sanitation. They suffer from diseases such as polio and HIV-AIDS. They are victimized through poverty and poor education, exploited in sweatshops, forced into child armies and into marriages, and trafficked in brothels and slave labor camps.

Millions of children have no health insurance, and can become victims of teen violence and internet predators. And everyone knows what an Amber Alert is.

C

Jesus took a child in his arms, a vulnerable child of God, and told the disciples that if they wanted to be great they should shift their attention to children who have no power, no prestige, no standing to offer them. To work with children is to give, to serve, to provide, rather than to profit and benefit.

God bless you who work with children here in this church and in our community. You are an example to us, having literally taken up Jesus' mandate to notice the children and serve them. The Church and individual Christians have been doing this from the early days of Christianity and shame on the Church when it's children are not safe.

But this mandate from Jesus goes beyond children to other vulnerable groups as well. When we serve the forgotten or marginalized or exploited --those who do not bring us fame or fortune-- we are "remembering the little people," as Jesus commanded.

What we may not remember, though, is what Jesus says next. "Whoever welcomes one such child, one such vulnerable person, in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me."

Whoever thinks about it that way? To look into the eyes of a child, or someone else we serve, is to look into the eyes of Jesus. To serve them is to be brought into God's presence. What could be greater than that?

D

Lots of people wonder where God is. How can I know God, they ask? How can I experience God? The answer is often heard from those who serve the needy and vulnerable. They say that serving is not a one way street. In serving they sense something happening to them, something changing them inside, something going on around them.

One youth who returned home from a mission trip where she had built homes for Habitat for Humanity felt so moved by her experience that she committed her life to becoming an architect who would design affordable housing. An adult who went on a youth mission trip to Mexico came back committed to beginning a hands on ministry team for the whole presbytery, which is now welcoming mission teams from across the country into his presbytery. Still another youth went on a mission trip with other youth who didn't like each other very much. That showed up the first night at dinner when a plate of hamburgers was empty before it made its way once around the dining table! Several years later, as an adult, he became the youth group advisor—transformed from the one being served to the one serving.

It turns out that serving others is more than just helping someone. Serving others is a route into the presence of God. And God's embrace of you as a servant may transform you in ways that surprise you and excite you and lead you into a more abundant life.

E

On the day Jesus told his disciples that as Messiah he was going to suffer and die, they started to argue about their own greatness. And we also learn they were afraid. Is there a connection between their fear of Jesus' prediction and their desire to be great? Were they responding to their fear by building up their own image, maybe trying to defend themselves by puffing up their own feathers (so to speak)?

And if fear centers our attention on ourselves and on our own feelings and needs, do we run the risk of missing children and all the other vulnerable people in our lives? Let me ask it more directly: Do we forget our Christian calling to support the weak and help the afflicted if fear is nipping at our heels?

Someone has suggested that the opposite of faith is not necessarily doubt. The opposite of faith is sometimes fear, because it saps our energy, time and awareness. Fear can turn us away from God's presence and activity in our lives, draining some of the hope and trust we have previously had in God. Fear can center us on our own survival and rob us of the robust life God has offered.

But how simply Jesus addresses our fears. He doesn't say, "Have faith," or, "Believe the right things about me." He doesn't even say, "Come to me." He says, "Do this simple, little thing." Embrace a child. Put your arms around someone in need. Be vulnerable to those who are already vulnerable. "And as a result," he says, "you will not only be welcoming me but the one who sent me."

Fear does not have the last word. Fear does not need to squeeze out the abundant life God has offered. "Remembering the little people" is the new life we have been offered that will lift up others, lift up ourselves, and it will center us and our community in the grace and love of our present and active God.

So, let's consider the fears that confront us. Fears over relationships? careers? health? being rejected?

What do we fear as a church? Evangelism? Running out of money? Empty pews? Closing our doors? Having to change something we like just the way it is? What fear has hold of you? What fear causes you to pull back into your shell? What fear saps your energy, time, and passion?

Inside your bulletin, please find an index card.... On one side, please write down the fear that looms largest over your life. Only one fear. Take a minute.....

Let's pray:

O God, we name this fear and pray that by naming it we can be released from some of its power and become more able to embrace the joy and life you have in store for us and everyone. Now, Dear God, help us to consider what small deed we might do today or tomorrow that will remind us that you are at work among us and we can trust in your love and grace. Amen.

So now, turn your index card over and write down one small thing you can do with and for someone who is in need-- some way you can become vulnerable, kind, welcoming, open-- to someone who is at risk.

May this be a small step away from fear...back toward faith and trust and abundant life for all.

