

"Hospitality & Outreach"

Pastor Dave Carlson
First Presbyterian Church
Sunday, October 14, 2012

Old Testament Lesson - Micah 6:6-8
New Testament Lesson – Mark 9:30-37

S. I. McMillen, in his book *None of These Diseases*, tells the story of a young woman who wanted to go to college. Her heart sank when she read the question on the application that asked, "Are you a leader?" Being both honest and conscientious, she wrote, "No," and returned the application, expecting the worst. To her surprise, she received this letter from the college:

"Dear Applicant: A study of the application forms reveals that this year our college will have 1,452 new leaders. We are accepting you because we feel it is imperative that they have at least one follower."

In our New Testament lesson, Jesus tells the disciples that he must be raised from the dead, and all they seem to hear is the part about him being dead. They begin to argue with one another about who is the greatest, presumably, who is the greatest next to Jesus, who among them is a natural-born leader. And Jesus, knowing that his disciples are not that different from 99.9 percent of all college applicants who fancy themselves leaders and who look down on being a follower, Jesus uses this as an opportunity to teach them something about greatness. Mark tells us, "(Jesus) sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, 'Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.' Then he takes a little child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms, he says to them, 'Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.'"

In Jesus' day servants and children were at the bottom of society. So the idea of being a servant of others and of elevating children as if when they enter the room they deserve such great welcome and hospitality that everything should come to a standstill, this is a difficult teaching for his disciples – so difficult that he taught it first only to his closest disciples, the twelve apostles. And this is a difficult teaching for us – so difficult that we have trouble putting it into practice, this teaching about serving others and welcoming all people, particularly the most vulnerable. I mean how many of us actually stop everything to welcome a child when he enters the room? Any young people here today, does that happen to you, do your mom and dad stop what they're doing to welcome you into the room? I suspect not too often, and for good reason. They want to teach you humility. And humility is something that Jesus wants to teach each and every one of us. When he says, "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,"

Jesus is teaching about the power and the mystery of humble service to God, that we give our life to it, and only in that, do we receive the greatest reward.

And Mark tells us that he and the other apostles “did not understand what (Jesus) was saying.” And that’s something we see for ourselves, as the apostles start arguing “with one another about who (among them is) the greatest.” No humble service there. And so they miss out on Jesus’ teaching about true greatness; that true greatness is found in giving of yourself for the sake of others. Jesus did two things that day with his apostles that reflect such self-giving greatness. The first thing he does is take the apostles aside to teach them in private. Mark tells us that Jesus “did not want anyone to know it; for he was teaching his disciples (and specifically, the twelve apostles).” Jesus did not want anyone to know about his favored status as the “Son of Man” because he wanted to protect his disciples from those who would do them harm if the truth about his great power and his favored status with God was made known. We can understand that, can’t we? The world we live in is fixated on power and greatness, people are consumed by jealousy as they jockey for position one ahead of the other. We see it in Washington D.C., in government, and we see it in Independence, Missouri – in our school boards and city counsels. We see it in our workplaces and in our schoolrooms – this jockeying for power and status, for “coolness” or favor. And we see it in our families, where boys and girls, moms and dads, parents and children, brothers and sisters try to get along, but often struggle with who is in charge at any one time or concerning any one issue or need.

When it comes to Washington D.C., humorist Dave Barry fleshes out such power struggles in his book *Dave Barry Hits Below the Beltway*. Barry describes governmental power struggles like this: “When I got to Washington,” he says, “I discovered that even among young people, being a good guy was not the key thing: The key thing was your position on the great Washington totem pole of status. Way up at the top of this pole is the president; way down at the bottom, below mildew,” says Barry, “is the public. In between is an extremely complex hierarchy of government officials, journalists, lobbyists, lawyers and other power players, holding thousands of minutely graduated status rankings differentiated by extremely subtle nuances that only Washingtonians are capable of grasping. For example, Washingtonians know whether a person whose title is ‘Principal Assistant Deputy Undersecretary’ is more or less important than a person whose title is ‘Associate Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary,’ or ‘Principal Deputy to the Deputy Assistant Secretary,’ or ‘Deputy to the Deputy Secretary,’ or ‘Principal Assistant Deputy Undersecretary,’ or ‘Chief of Staff to the Assistant Assistant Secretary.’” Barry concludes by noting that, “(All of these are real federal job titles.)” “Everybody in Washington always seems to know exactly how much status everybody else has.”

But what about in Galilee. Turns out that in Galilee at the time of Jesus things weren’t much different, until that is, Jesus showed up with a

different way of understanding who really has favored status. In all that he did, and especially in teaching about God and heavenly things, Jesus selflessly sought to serve and protect his apostles, his other followers, and even his enemies. And so it is with us. Those among us who rightly utilize humanity's favored status as children of God **put the interests of others** first ahead of their own interests and needs, whenever they can.

Do you do that? Do we as a church do that, put other people first? And if not, what gets in the way? Just the other night, I was watching a TV show on TNT called Major Crimes it's a spin off from The Closer starring Kyra Sedgwick – and during the commercial they promo'd the show by saying, "To Serve and Protect, it's all about Conviction."

Maybe that's how Jesus would say it today – "to serve and protect, being a Christian is all about conviction," it's all about our conviction to be true to our calling, even at the risk of our best interests, to give of ourselves for others.

This is the first thing we see about greatness in our reading today.

The second thing we see, the second thing that Jesus did that reflects such self-giving greatness is he welcomed the children, he elevated the status of children in a society where they were the lowest most overlooked people on earth. That's just the way it was back then. When Jesus says,

"Whoever welcomes" a child in his name welcomes him, and whoever welcomes him welcomes not him but the one who sent him, the focus is all on hospitality – on welcoming the other person, no matter what their status is. Warm, genuine, unbridled hospitality was a hallmark of Jesus' ministry; welcoming the other person. And not just any other person – and particularly not the rich or powerful person who can do something for us, or the tall and handsome person or the most beautiful or cutest person you've ever seen – but rather welcoming the most innocent and needy people in our community and in our lives. This is what Jesus teaches us.

And, as we know, this isn't always easy. And yet, true hospitality is extended **in spite of the burden** it might place on us, **with no regard for getting anything for ourselves**. True, Christian hospitality is extended to all people no matter their status, and no matter the cost.

This church does a good job of welcoming newcomers, of extending hospitality to people, and in such a way that they feel free to come along side us naturally and without any undue pressure or ulterior motives.

This is true Christian hospitality.

We also do a good job of following Jesus' first teaching about greatness – we do a good job of **reaching out to others**.

The pastor's column that I wrote for the October PresbyTimes newsletter, and which has also been posted to our church website, this column reflects these two strengths of First Presbyterian Church – that we do offer easy-going Hospitality and that we have opportunities for people to join us in hands-on Mission Outreach and service. Not that we don't struggle sometimes in doing these things. We do. And when we do find ourselves struggling that's when we find ourselves lost in activities and pursuits and distractions that run contrary to our true calling.

Our challenge as Christians, both as a church and as individuals, is to constantly be in touch with our calling as children of God, our calling to welcome all people, particularly the lowly and downtrodden, and to serve others, particularly the vulnerable and needy.

Next week we will continue reading in the Gospel According to Mark, where Jesus points us to ways in which we can stay in touch with our Christian calling, ways we can access the power of our faith, ways that we can continually claim our identity as followers of Christ.

But for today, let us remember that whether our struggle is as an individual, as churches, or as governments and schoolrooms and workplaces, let us remember that Jesus shows us the way to maintain our focus on our calling as Christians, a calling that is centered on true, genuine hospitality and sacrificial, selfless mission outreach. And if you, as an individual, as a member or friend of First Presbyterian Church, if you truly do identify with our calling to be a witness for Christ-like Hospitality and Mission Outreach, if this is something that you see God doing through this church, then share that with your friends and family, your neighbors and colleagues, and classmates. Review the Presbytetimes column in the newsletter or on our website or Face book page. Share this with the people in your lives, and then invite them to join us in our ministry of Hospitality and Mission Outreach, invite them to come along side us in service to God, and to one another, and to this community, and beyond. Amen.

PASTORAL PRAYER

God of creation, you entrusted us with the care of much that you have created. Help us take our responsibility seriously. Lead us in ensuring that everyone has access to the earth's resources and other basic necessities, so that all your children have safe water to drink, food to eat and clean air to breathe. Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayer. God of glory, we pray for our leaders — our church leaders, our elected officials, and all workers and volunteers. May their decisions and work be guided by your wisdom, and may their actions take into account the poor and oppressed. Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayer. God of compassion, we lift up to you all those who live in places of strife and warfare. While they wait in hope for peace, may they find peace and refuge in you. Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayer. God of love, we ask your loving care for those awaiting a diagnosis, suffering from physical or mental illness, or recovering from surgery. We pray, also, for their caregivers. Give them patience, strength and compassion, as well as time to care for themselves. Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayer. God of life, comfort those who grieve, particularly the families of this church who have suffered recent losses. May they be blessed with sweet memories and find true solace in the hope of the life to come. Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayer. God of grace, help us come before you with the wonder and innocence of children. Remind us to set aside our pride and vanity and instead be filled with humility. Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayer.

We commend all our prayers to you, O God, knowing that you hear all the joys and concerns of our hearts — even the ones we cannot put into words but which we lift up to you now in silence. We pray all this in the name of Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior, who taught us to pray, saying:

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.

For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever.

Amen.