

**Sermon: September 23, 2018 – Mark 9: 30-37**  
**Ralph Connor Memorial United Church, Canmore, AB – Rev Greg Wooley**

A happy-making skill that many people have, is song recognition. Especially if the song comes from those teenage years when so many things lock themselves permanently into memory, many of us can hear the first bar or two of a popular song from long ago, even if we haven't heard it for ages and, in most cases pick it up and hum it from there, maybe even sing the lyrics for you. It's not a particularly showy skill, but it sure feels good when a musical memory zings in out of nowhere and you're singing a song from way back when.

The key phrase here is "in most cases". I'm pretty good at song recognition, but Tanya can attest to the fact when we're working at anthem and hymn selection, there are times when I'll spot the rise and fall at the beginning of a hymn tune, figure that it's the tune we want, and then Tanya gives me that "really?" look... and I know that this is not the familiar tune we're looking for. It was close, but it was wrong.

"Close, but wrong" was the theme of my week when picking my way through this little hodgepodge of a gospel reading. Because at least twice in these eight verses, there are echoes of other Bible stories that had me humming entirely the wrong tune.

Let's look at the second one, first. In verse 36, we read "[Jesus] took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms, he said to them..."

And the way my mind finishes that sentence, in a combination of scripture memory and Sunday School song recognition ("Jesus loves the little children, for he said one day"), is "let the children come unto me, keep them not away" or the actual words, "Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs." Which is what Jesus says one chapter from now in a completely different setting, but isn't what he said here.

While that later scripture is consistent with what he said at Capernaum, it's not where Jesus was going with the disciples at this earlier moment. Where Jesus was going with them, in this place, at this moment, was all about their understanding of power, and leadership, and greatness. So the actual way that this scripture went in today's gospel reading, was like so: "[Jesus] took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms, he said 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.'"

He takes a child, representing everything that children would have represented in that culture, as an entry point for the disciples to deepen their understanding of God, whose power in the world is seen in unconventional ways. Jesus indicates that welcoming children will connect them not only to him but to God, and in so doing he interrupts whatever songs might have been playing in the disciples' heads about power and might and how God is known, and re-programs that thinking to go in a different direction.

Tying to determine what children represented in those days, however, is no easy task. From the days of Abram and Sarai, God's promise to the people had been inextricably linked to the power of descendants, as numerous as the grains of sand on the shore or the stars in the sky. None of the ancient stories of parents and children – Abraham and Isaac, Rebekah and Jacob and Esau, the filial resentment toward Joseph - would work unless children were viewed as precious ones who link us to God's future. And yet the reality may not have been so grand.

Canadian Professor Tracy Maria Lemos, who teaches at Huron College in London, Ontario, would argue quite the opposite. If we think of our recent history, it was only a century ago that women came to be considered "persons" in Canada, and Professor Lemos makes the case that back in the Ancient Near East, children were not regarded as persons. Children were bought

and sold as property; they had no voice, other than their parents' voice; they often absorbed harsh treatment from their parents, and they had no "agency" – no ability to make an independent decision of their own.

So in embracing a child when speaking to the disciples about power, which of these concepts might Jesus have been placing before them? Let's go with, "all of the above." Embracing a powerless, voiceless, not-yet-a-person child as connecting point to Christ, underlines the "upside-down-ness" of the promised Kin-Dom of God. If you want to understand the all-encompassing power of love and the true power of the Christ, and if you want to come close to the God who is the source of that love, you begin by paying attention to and affirming the needs of those regarded as "nothing." What better example in that place, than a child?

If we think of this scene from exactly the opposite standpoint, seeing children as the most important members of the culture, embracing a child is an embodied metaphor of endorsing God's promise of a better future, a historic blessing brought forward in the mission of Jesus. All of those stories of fidelity and struggle and promise and hope, etched into the disciples' souls in learning those stories of the Torah, come alive in this child. Jesus connects their mission to the God who leads her children out of bondage into freedom, through the embrace of this child of God. By placing a child in their midst, Jesus expresses the timeless hopes of the God they already know so well.

And there's a third thing going on here, as well. When Jesus embraces a child, Jesus – is – embracing – a – child. That child. This child (point at self). Those children (point at congregation). Jesus moves them out of their heads and into their hearts and their bodies, by holding a child in his arms. Jesus, the one inviting them to internalize God's agenda of love as their own agenda, calls them – and us - not to love the concept of children, but to love the flesh-and-blood child who really could use a spiritual home. Jesus calls them – and us – not to love the concept of inclusion, but to actively invite, welcome, and listen to anyone who has been relegated to the margins of society or the shadows of religious life. Jesus calls them – and us – to be confident that we are beloved of God, held in God's loving arms just as surely as that child was held in Christ's embrace.

This incident, in which Jesus brings a child into the circle of disciples to complete the circle, was the second place in today's gospel lesson where I finished Jesus' sentence for him but was singing from the wrong song-sheet. The first place, was when Jesus confronted the disciples for their chatter on the road.

Here's how it goes, starting at verse 33: "Then they came to Capernaum; and when [Jesus] was in the house he asked them, 'What were you arguing about on the way?' But they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another who was the greatest." In this case, we hadn't actually heard that detail in the story – we know it only because Jesus tells us. And as the embarrassed disciples look at their feet, chastened like schoolboys caught shooting spitballs at each other, I've already zipped ahead and filled in the blanks. This must have been the time that James and John had decided that they would have positions of authority above the other disciples in the kingdom of God. "When the ten heard this, they began to be angry with James and John. So Jesus called them and said to them, '... whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve.'" But again, I'm ahead of the text – that's from the 10<sup>th</sup> chapter of Mark, Mark 10: 41-45, and we're not there yet.

My favourite Greek interpreter, a Presbyterian minister in California named Mark Davis, suggests that if we get right into the nuance of the Greek text here, the argument between the disciples could have been more about the general meaning of "greatness," than about which of THEM was greatest. The Greek can be read as "what is greatness" or "who is greatest" and even the "who is greatest" doesn't necessarily imply that one of them wins the contest. To me,

this more general musing on greatness fits well with the rest of the passage: Jesus talks about his sufferings and death as part of God's redemptive action in the world, the disciples either misunderstand or resist this idea, and then a debate breaks out: not about their pecking order, but about the nature of greatness. If Jesus is the Messiah, as some of them were beginning to assert, why would he allow himself to be killed? If God is great, why would the Son of God/Son of Man be humiliated and eliminated? That sounds like stuff to argue about, right then, right there; a discussion about their relative rank and power is a bit out of place. So we insert the right words – "But they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another who was the greatest/what is greatness. He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all." And then we're back to Jesus and the child: "Then he took a little child and put it among them..."

This debate – about the nature of leadership, and greatness, and power – is such a contemporary thing for us. Every morning, I click on the smartphone and before the headlines have even loaded, I've asked the silent question, "what has he (Trump) done now?" But our unsettled state now goes so far beyond the pronouncements of that one person. Many have started wondering if asking questions of power means that you are disloyal; many have started to distrust their neighbours, especially those of a different ethnicity or religion or sexual identity; many are seeing the world divided into boastful winners, whom they cheer, and diminished losers, whom they deride; and a LOT of folks carry with them an undifferentiated, constant, low level fear. And as citizens of the world, and people of faith, we need to have those discussions about what greatness really means in the world. What do we admire, what do we aspire to, what captures our attention? What kind of world do we want to live in, and by whose authority?

For me, the answer to these nagging worries comes when Jesus scoops a child onto his lap, and reminds his disciples what messaging they are to pay attention to. Jesus repeatedly interprets their shared mission and the context they're working in, in terms of the last and the least, the bruised and the wounded, the despised and the excluded – this is the population they are to love, and serve, and honour. Jesus re-shapes their worldview – and ours – as a complete inverse of the noise around them. In a world where those holding coercive force were in charge, he lets them (and us) in on the underground secret, that divine power is actually asserted when a cup of water is offered to the thirsty, when shelter is received by the homeless, when affirmative friendship develops with someone who has been told that she's worthless. Jesus connects behaviour to beliefs: those who are willing to lift up the personhood of a child, will be most able to understand the new realm where the downtrodden are lifted up, and the braggarts sent away. Hearing their wonderings about greatness, Jesus encourages the disciples to keep expressing his inclusive love as they go from town to town in Galilee, for that will open lives to the transformative power of God. That same message is being spoken loud and clear to us today, as we seek faithful ways to live our lives as individuals and as a community of faith. As we learned in the discussions we had this summer around the "Screenings with Meanings" film series, taking the steps needed to make this place a safe, accessible, meaningful place for all, and truly opening ourselves to being changed by the community around us, is not easy work and it certainly does not fit a model in which we see ourselves as central and powerful. It does, however, fit the model of a Saviour who sits in our midst and embraces the one with the least status, and says, "this is who we are in my name." We are the ones embracing, we are the ones being embraced, we are the lovers and the beloved, we are those who bring Christ's healing intention and those who need others to pray for us in our missteps. The power dynamics of the Kin-dom of God are deeply countercultural, and totally worth giving ourselves to.

At the start of this message, we were reminded of how satisfying it can be when we hear those first few notes of a tune and know how it goes. With that in mind, this morning's message ends

with a section of the United Church of Canada's Song of Faith – which places lyrical words in our midst, as we consider the hope that Jesus first placed before his disciples 2000 years ago, which he places once more before this gathering of disciples in this day:

Jesus announced the coming of God's reign—a commonwealth not of domination but of peace, justice, and reconciliation.

He healed the sick and fed the hungry.

He forgave sins and freed those held captive by all manner of demonic powers.

He crossed barriers of race, class, culture, and gender.

He preached and practised unconditional love— love of God, love of neighbour, love of friend, love of enemy—and he commanded his followers to love one another as he had loved them....

We sing of a church seeking to continue the story of Jesus by embodying Christ's presence in the world.

We are called together by Christ as a community of broken but hopeful believers, loving what he loved, living what he taught, striving to be faithful servants of God in our time and place....

...We sing of Jesus...we sing hallelujah!

And we continue our worship, in singing VU 563, "Jesus, you have come to the lakeshore"

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