

*The Counter-Cultural Gospel (part II)*

Mark 9:30-37

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Our lectionary gospel for today picks up a few verses ahead of where we were last week and it has a similar theme, thus the title: *The Counter-Cultural Gospel, part II.*

The story is told of a new pastor coming to a congregation. That first Sunday the pastor preached a dynamite sermon. People couldn't wait until the next week. The congregation was quite surprised when she preached the *identical* sermon! "Well," thought the congregation members, "if you had to hear a sermon twice, that would be the one to hear." The third Sunday folks didn't know quite what to expect. Lo and behold, the *same* sermon. So the elders got together and called on the pastor the following day.

"You know, Pastor, that's a really terrific sermon, but...well, we've heard it three times. Do you have any other sermons?"

"Oh, sure, I have a whole bunch of them and I am working on more. As soon as you've done what I said in this first sermon I'll go on to the others."

Well, first let's walk our way through the passage and then see where this story might intersect with ours.

*They went on from there and passed through Galilee.*

Dick Donovan notes that "it is a poignant scene. We have to wonder what Jesus feels as he leaves familiar and welcoming Galilee, where he has had so much success, to go to Judea, where he anticipates so much opposition."

*He did not want anyone to know it; for he was teaching his disciples,...* There is a time and place for everything. Jesus has been healing and preaching. Now he needs to make sure his disciples understand who he is and what he's about because soon he's turning over the entire operation to these guys who haven't been overly swift thus far.

What is he teaching? *The Son of Man (THE Human Being) is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him, and three days after being killed, he will rise again.* This is the second time he gives them this vital teaching. There will be one more time in this gospel.

*But they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him.* It's too overwhelming. They don't get it. Plus, last time when Peter opened his mouth Jesus called him *Satan*, for crying out loud. The disciples are silent in the face of the second reading of this incredible prediction.

Evidently as they walked along the disciples dropped back out of earshot of Jesus and returned to a more familiar topic, "one dear to their hearts" (Dick Donovan) "Who would be greatest among them?" That is, when Jesus throws out the Romans and becomes king, who gets to be the vice-king and have access to the royal hot tub?

We pick up with verse 33: *Then they came to Capernaum; and when he 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. He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.*

The word *servant* there is, in the Greek, *diakonos*, from which we get our word *deacon*.

*Then he took a little child and put it among them; and taking the child in his arms,...* We read this story and we think, “Aaaaaahhh, a cute little kid...” We love little children and in this country and culture we dote on them. Plus, most of us have heard this story a hundred times, so we don’t at all get the shock value.

Remember when “children were seen and not heard” in the long ago days of American life? Well, the Middle Eastern culture of Jesus’ day was such that children were not even *seen* much, at least by men. Children were fourth class citizens, had no rights, and were under the care of the women who were supposed to keep them quiet and out of sight. According to Leviticus, if a son curses his parent he is to be put to death! Children are nobodies!

For the fortieth time the disciples must have been open-mouthed and shaking their heads, muttering silently, “This Jesus is something else. What next?!”

*Taking the child 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.’*

Where is the living word for our lives?

**First, let me acknowledge that I read this story from the position of male, white privilege.** Growing up I heard from parents and teachers and political leaders that all the world is open to me. If I work hard I can become anything I want to be. For me and people in my position this story is an obvious lesson about humility and service.

But what if all your life you have been told you are to be subservient, you are a nobody? You have been assigned your lowly place in life by destiny, or even by God. *I know people who have been raised to believe that they are not worth very much, and who act out that image of themselves in their lives. I can't believe that God wants them to humble themselves and to be last. God wants them to stand tall, and to be proud, and to be free to seize the life that God has given to them.*

*So this passage may not be for everyone.* (From a sermon entitled *Blind Ambition*, by Mark Trotter)

Let us remember that Jesus was addressing his words to 12 men who thought they were big deals, or at least were about to be big deals in the coming kingdom.

So today’s sermon is for those of us who think we are big deals.

*There's a story about a man whose great ambition was to become a general in the army. He imagined all the attention he would get, everybody saluting him, somebody to drive him around, all the perquisites of that high rank. One day he reached his goal. He was promoted to Brigadier General.*

*The next day he moved into his new office, sat behind his new, big desk. He could just feel the power emanating from that office. His aide walked in, said, "There's a man here to see you." The general said, "Send him right in."*

He thought, "I'm going to impress this man with how important I am, how much power I have." He turned around, picked up the phone, and pretended that he was talking to the President of the United States. He said, "Mr. President, I understand what you are saying to me. I think your idea is a good one, and I can tell you that I will share it with the Secretary of Defense when I see him tomorrow. Thank you for calling. Goodbye sir."

He hung up the phone, turned around, and saw this ordinary soldier standing there. The general barked at him, "What can I do for you young man." The soldier said, "Nothing sir. I'm just here to hook up your phone." (Norman Neaves, in Trotter’s sermon.)

**There is a place for ambition and that is to be ambitious to be the best servant of Christ that we can be.**

That won’t usually put us in the public eye. But sometimes. That won’t usually make us a lot of money, but sometimes it will. The money is a byproduct, not a goal.

Jesus said, “I came not to be served, but to serve,” and he calls us to follow that example.

Two stories about humility in people who have a right to be proud.

*Some years ago St. Paul's School of Theology in Kansas City was seeking a new president. Over one hundred candidates applied for the position. The search committee narrowed the list to five eminently qualified persons. Then somebody came up with a brilliant idea: let's send a person to the institutions where each of the five finalists is currently employed, and let's interview the janitor at each place, asking him what he thinks of the (person) seeking to be our president. This was done and a janitor gave such a glowing appraisal of William MacElvaney that he was selected President of St. Paul's School of Theology. (Brett Blair and Staff "The Measure of Greatness")*

(After the first service Tim Dubis said, "By the way, Bill, I would give you a good recommendation...Just wanted you to know I was listening.")

The other story is about Dorothy Day, founder of the Catholic Worker Movement and dozens of settlement houses across the country that served homeless, indigent people. A pastor writes about his internship during seminary in which he was assigned to work in one of those settlement houses. The first morning he was to report to Dorothy Day. He spotted her seated at a table in deep conversation with a man whose attire, demeanor and aroma showed him to be obviously one of the homeless and mentally ill clients. The seminary intern drew closer, but stopped a respectful distance away to await a break in the conversation. He reports that Dorothy Day continued to give the man across from her her full attention until he was finished speaking. Then Day turned to the intern and said, "Yes? You wish to speak with one of us?"

"*With one of us?*"!! The pastor writes that that question taught him more about servant leadership than all the rest of his seminary training combined.

Those of us who think we might be big deals are called to be humble servants.

**All of us know the joy of service. That's one of the most frustrating things about losing our health,** which sometimes happens as we age and sometimes before we are very old. We can't serve like we have been doing for decades. Instead, people have to serve us. Many people just hate that. As you know, I worked the last seven years in care centers with elderly people in tenuous health. One of the most common complaints was that they were used to doing things for others, but now "I hate that people have to do for me!"

I would say, "That is really tough. I am sorry that your health won't allow you to do what you used to do...But think back about when you were doing for others. How did that make you feel?"

"Great. I loved it."

"Right. We like to serve others. It makes us feel good. Well, now you are doing people a favor when you let them serve you. You are allowing them to experience the joy of service. You have been a gracious giver. Now it's **your turn to be a gracious receiver.**"

Let me tell you about Mrs. McCormack. She was a member of my first congregation, First Presbyterian of Stillwater, which I served as associate pastor. Mrs. McCormack had served well in virtually every lay capacity in the congregation. She had been the Sunday School Superintendent since Jesus was a teenager. She had been a deacon, president of the Women's Association, you name it. But now she was old and frail and largely bedridden. One day as I visited her in her home she said to me, "Pastor Bill, I can't do all the things I used to do. But I'm not useless." She reached over to the bedside table and picked up the church newsletter with the calendar in it. "I want you to know that as you are doing your activities I am praying for you. On Monday evening when you are training the Bethel Series teachers I am praying for you. On Tuesday evening while you are at the session meeting I am praying. On Wednesday night when you and the kids are doing Youth Club I am praying for all of you...and so on."

Wow. Any success I might have had in that congregation I owe to Mrs. McCormack. **For those of you who can't serve in ways you used to, please hold the church in prayer.** It's invaluable.

Jesus said to welcome children in his name. Our 13 year-old daughter, Anji, came to us from India when she was 17 months old. Then, as now, she was a beautiful child, with sparkling black eyes, a bright smile and skin

the color of coffee with cream. She adjusted to life with our family immediately and was the most contented kid you could imagine. Once at a family gathering the adults were talking about how Anji was always so happy. Kris's sister commented, "Well, every time Anji walks in a room, people turn, smile, conversation stops, and then everyone says, 'ANJI!' and runs to pick her up. If every time I entered a room, people would stop talking, smile and run to embrace me saying, 'LYNN!' I would be pretty happy, too."

Wouldn't that be great? If we all did that every time someone entered a room...there would be no wars.

Do we acknowledge people? Even though I was working on this sermon all week I blew it right off the bat this morning. I came in the sanctuary with my list of things to do to prepare for the service. I saw a purse and some books sitting right there next to the communion table. Knowing that *I* would forget about them if I had set them there, as soon as I spotted Judy (our choir director) I called out (in a business-like, cross-things-off-a-list voice), "Judy. Are these your purse and books?"

Not, "Good morning, Judy? How are you today?...By the way, (pleasantly) do these belong to you?" Sheesh!

I try, I'm not always successful by any means, but I try to **recognize that people are people, created in the image of God.** At the grocery check-out counter, or the waitperson in a restaurant, I *try* to really look at them and treat them like people, not just someone who is doing for me.

*taking the child 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.'*

See what's at stake here? **The person who welcomes a child gets credit for welcoming God.** Wow!

**How do we literally welcome children?** By taking care of our own, of course, but also our neighbors. By serving as a Scout leader, a helper in the schools, as a Big Sister or Big Brother. Here in the Twin Cities is an organization called *Kinship* which is like Big Brothers/Big Sisters except specifically Christian. We can provide foster care or even adopt children.

And then **we can welcome children figuratively, by advocating on their behalf** in so many ways.

In the United States, the richest and most powerful country on earth, there are millions of children in poverty. Millions of children in poverty. Just 15% of the US military budget would lift every American child out of poverty.

That, my friends, is sin.

When we talk about sin we usually think of sex, or stealing or something like that. This, however, is truly sin. The silence of most of the church in the face of poverty is *sin* with a capital S, capital I, and capital N.

On the other hand, the Church, capital C Church, has also been faithful to this passage. Think of the schools, hospitals, orphanages that the Church has built around the world through the centuries, loving the lost and the hopeless. And the church, little c church, our congregation, has been faithful as well, as Gideon and Samuel Pond came to the wilderness to bring the gospel to Native American children as well as adults, as we have helped to found VEAP, as we do mission trips, as we make possible the Homework Connection and on and on.

May we continue to be faithful to this call, welcoming children in the name of Jesus. Amen.