

## FOR THE LITTLE PEOPLE    MARK 9:30-37

Jesus said: “I am going to be delivered into the hands of angry men and they are going to kill me.”

Once again the instruction bears upon the fate that awaits him as Son of Man: that he will be given up into the hands of men, be killed, and rise after three days. We know the reception that Jesus received. They will kill him; they will not receive him. He came unto his own, he came to his own home town, and his own people did not receive him. How do you and I receive him?

The disciples are still impervious to this truth and are afraid to ask him about it. Half knowing what he is saying, in an understandable way they shrink from full knowledge of the unpalatable truth. They prefer to cling to the exciting prospect for their future that being close associates of the Messiah would seem to entail. You know the old statement that is bandied about in centers of power. “It’s not what you know, it’s who you know.”

And if Jesus in their minds is going to be the all powerful Messiah, what will that do for their status when they can say that they have a cabinet post and are close to him. They would have sky high status.

An aspect of this has, in fact, been the subject of an argument they have been having on “the way”. They have been arguing about which of them is greatest-and so be the first in line to enjoy a leading role in the coming messianic kingdom...maybe as a czar of something or other. Nothing could run more counter to what Jesus has been attempting to teach them. Hence their guilty, half-knowing silence when Jesus questions them in the house at Capernaum.

In response Jesus sits down, summons the 12 and lays down a principle of leadership in his messianic community: the one who would be first must be last of all and servant of all. He dramatizes the lesson by taking a child from the house and setting the child in front of them. He wraps his arms around the child and then makes an extraordinary statement of self-identification: “Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and who ever welcomes me, welcomes not me but the one who sent me.”

To grasp the full force of this action on Jesus’ part we have to put aside the idealization of childhood that arose in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In the ancient world children were special no doubt to their parents, but in the ancient world they had no social status or value whatsoever; until adulthood...they were nobodies.

In contrast to the glory thinking of the disciples, membership within the community of the faithful will involve giving status to those who have none. Welcoming hospitality, a major aspect of life in the ancient world, is to be extended to the most unlikely, thus challenging traditional notions of status. Welcoming of the unimportant will be a hallmark of the circle of Jesus’ followers, as it was in Jesus ministry.

For someone outside the family to welcome a child would be to turn the prevailing values and social mores upside down. It would require putting aside all one's ideas of self importance and adult status to simply meet the child as an equal, as child to child. That says Jesus, is what the disciples must practice. In doing so they will be welcoming him, and not only him but the Father who stands behind his entire life and mission, which is not one of dominance and being served but one of service, destined to culminate in the supreme service of giving his life as a ransom for many.

It is hard to exaggerate the significance of this gesture of divine identification with a child. Not only does it challenge the disciples' notion of messiah-ship, it goes to the heart of their understanding and our understanding of God. Is God to be thought of as a kind of extraterrestrial Ruler to whom nothing but fear and service is due? Or is the God revealed by Jesus a God whose primary gesture towards human beings as that of One who serves, one who comes among us in the guise of a child? Jesus gesture of hugging the child in front of all shows more powerfully than any words could express the preciousness of each and every human life in the sight of God, no matter how small and insignificant. We are all in our littleness rather than our achievement, hugged by God in this moment

I am always moved by stories in which a person serves another by a substitutionary sacrifice.

In the Tale of Two Cities, at the end of the novel, Sydney, who is English, visits Charles the night before he is to be executed. He offers to exchange places with him. Charles refuses, but Sydney has him drugged and smuggles him into a waiting carriage. Then Sydney takes Charles's place. Charles and his family escape afterward to England.

That night in prison, a young seamstress who is also condemned to die comes up to Sydney and begins to converse with him, thinking him to be Charles Darnay. When she realizes that it is not him, her eyes widen and she asks: "Are you dying for him?" Sydney responds: "And his wife and child. Hush! Yes."

Then she confesses that she is terribly frightened and is not sure she will be able to face her death. She asks the brave stranger if he will hold her hand to the end. When the time comes, they go to death hand in hand. She finds herself composed, even comforted and hopeful, and long as she keeps her eyes on him.

The girl in the story was sinking under the weight of her trial. Her strength was giving out, but then she was smitten by the wonder of his substitutionary sacrifice, and it enabled her to face the ultimate test.

Moving? Yes, but the Gospel goes one better. I always found these stories of sacrifice and servant hood very emotionally affecting. I came away from them resolving to live more courageously and unselfishly. I didn't always follow through on my resolutions. The stories moved my emotions and pricked my conscience, but my heart patterns stayed intact. I was still driven by a need to prove myself to others, to win approval and acclaim, to control what people thought of me. As long as these fears and needs had such power over me, my intentions to change could not go very far.

The Gospel, however, is not just a moving fictional story about someone else. It's a true story about us. We are actually in it.

And to save us and serve us little ones, Jesus actually gave up something greater than human celebrity. Jesus came to our prison and despite our unwillingness to be saved has taken our place. The seamstress was moved by a sacrifice that wasn't even for her. How much more can we be empowered by the discovery that Jesus has given himself for us, has changed places with us, who are the little ones.

I can only say that when I began realizing I was actually inside Jesus' story (and he inside mine) it began to change me. The fear and pride that captured my heart was being dislodged. You begin to see that Jesus cares for little ones of which I am one. And that enables us by his grace to be aware and to serve the little ones around us.

And example of that is when you hear the words upon coming to the Lord's Supper; "welcome to the Lord's Table!" Is it said because we are mighty and powerful? Or is it Jesus serving us because we are little and need his help and strength and forgiveness.

And can we welcome the little ones with his grace in his name, because that is who Jesus identifies with! The little ones! You and me!

His gestures are puzzling and his words are a mystery until that day when he radically identifies with that which is least in the world, becoming the crucified one, rejected by the world, rejected by religious leaders, rejected by his disciples, rejected by his own heavenly Father, and yet fiercely and faithfully holding on onto every last sinner, that his death might be the way that the least and the littlest of all enter into the Kingdom of God.

*Heavenly Greeting* Mattie Stepanek MD

But I never knew if you reached out with your right hand,  
Dear God, for a long time, I have wondered about  
How you will meet me when I die and come to heaven.  
I know you reach out Your hand to welcome  
Your people into your home

Or if you reached out with your left hand.  
But now I don't have to wonder about that anymore.  
I asked my mommy and she told me that you  
Reach out both of your hands, and welcome us with  
A great big giant hug. Wow!  
I can't wait for my hug, God.  
Thank you  
And Amen.