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University Lutheran Church of Hope  
9-19-21  
Mark 9:30-37  
“Least of These”

Let's pray together. May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, oh God.

As you listened in to this text, I wonder what caught your ear? What tugged at your heart? What prompted questions in you? There is so much going on here, and if you've been listening for the past several weeks, you might hear some themes – themes that are ever present in the gospel of mark. We hear again, about the predicted death of Jesus. We hear about the last being first. And we hear again about the bumbling disciples that just don't get it.

I, for one, feel a great degree of solidarity with these disciples. I think they get a bad rap. And I think the 2,000 years out judgmental commentary about their questioning and inability to rise above the cultural context is arrogant at best. They are not God. They are people, like us, and their perspective is included in this story because they have something to teach us.

These disciples are living in a world, much like ours, where power, wealth and strength are seen as the keys to a good life. When Jesus calls himself a King, and then talks about dying, it must have been confusing. Maybe it still is?

Of course they'd be huddling together, talking and questioning, arguing about very human things – like who is the greatest, and, how do we get to be the greatest. I don't imagine the disciples were necessarily concerned with being the richest, or the most

powerful, but I do wonder if some of them were concerned with being the best disciple – the greatest healer perhaps, or the greatest activist, the smartest one, or the one most concerned with the poor, the sick, the outcast. The most “woke” if you will. I wonder if that might be a battle for greatness that we can relate to a little better?

...Did you notice the way that Jesus responded to them? The way Jesus responds to you? He simply asked them about their conversation. He didn't shame them. He didn't rebuke them. In Mark, Jesus routinely rebukes the disciples, but not this time. I imagine, with his presence, that he assured them of their belovedness and worth. And then he honored their curiosity and passion, and figured out a way to really help them understand what he was trying to say.

As Jesus struggles to really connect with the disciples and their questions, he decides that words are not going to get him there, and so he brings a child into the midst of the circle. I often wonder what that child thought. Children in 1<sup>st</sup> century Palestine were among the most marginalized and objectified people in that culture, no matter how precocious or cute. To welcome these little ones, these weak ones, was to welcome Christ. To follow Jesus is to relinquish cultural conceptions of greatness.

A couple of years ago, before the pandemic, but after Donald Trump was elected as president, our students were struggling. A lot. The climate crisis was making itself more obvious, as was polarization and demonization of the Other. Our national discourse was filled with revenge and spite. And so we turned to St. Therese of Lisieux, also called the Little Flower.

Therese grew up in the late 1800's, in a very religious family. She lost her mother at age 4, and was consistently sick in both her body and spirit for most of her childhood, what we might now call a series of adverse childhood experiences. In part following her sisters, and in part in response to a call from God, she joined a nearby Carmelite monastery. As she wrestled with her childhood, the limitations of life in a monastery, and a heap of grief, she had a revelation about greatness, and it was then that she started writing that would eventually be compiled into a book called *The Little Way*. When the trauma of her childhood would haunt her, or when her mental health would decline, she would lean into what she called littleness. She wrote:

“Keep away from all that glitters, and learn to love your littleness. Follow this little way with an attitude of lowliness of spirit, trust, even be satisfied to feel nothing when you serve God and others wherever and however you can. It is then, no matter how obscure and lowly you might be, that Jesus will come and seek you out, and transform you with his love.”

For our students, exploring what it meant to walk “*The Little Way*,” was a great relief. We found concrete ways, some of them acts of charity on campus, some of them random acts of kindness, some of them simple contributions to justice work. By taking one little step, students discovered two things – (1) that it was possible for them to take action and share God's love instead of consistently being in a state of overwhelm, (2) that in taking action it actually motivated them to keep taking action – it fed them, and (3) that they could never do it all, and so depending on God and others became paramount.

The problems we are collectively facing are legion. It is overwhelming to take in the information. We can become paralyzed by the number of opportunities to contribute. It may even be tempting to simply check out.

So here is the good news, friends in Christ. You are both big, and small. Greatness, as the world might describe it, is not demanded of you. Oof. That feels hard for me to say. But it's true. You are not God. Thanks be to God. It isn't all yours to do.

But some of it is. It is the gift of our freedom in Christ. God loves you. In all of your overwhelm and paralysis. In your action and in your loving. God created you, and calls you good. And a part of that goodness is that you have purpose in life. You might not know what it is. You might be huddling with your friends wondering what it means to contribute in this world, in this 21<sup>st</sup> century. You might be reckoning with the fact that relinquishing power, in some cases, is actually a Gospel centered activity. You might be discovering your beauty and purpose for the first time – you should relish this moment.

Root down into that love, and then rise to meet the moment in front of you. However it is that you step out into this week, this month, this future that is unfolding before us, know that God is with you, calling forth love and delight, justice and truth, in big and small ways. May it be so today. May it be so always. Amen.

And I wonder how much we've romanticized the picture in our heads of this scene. Was this a carefully groomed and well-dressed child right out of a target ad, being just precocious enough to get knowing smiles from the crowd? Was this a child with big feelings –out of their comfort zone and acting out of those feelings of being scared, trapped, or anxious? Was this a child who had experienced trauma, abandonment or despair at an already young age?

How you imagine this child informs your theology, who you God is to you. Jesus said to the disciples: <sup>37</sup>“Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.”

As we consider how we might respond to this text, and to God's great love for us, I wonder where you locate yourself? Are you Jesus in this story, teaching the clueless others about God and who God values? Are you more like a disciple, now entering into life curious and humbled by the countercultural vision set before us? Or maybe in this country, you carry a marginalized identity, and you listen to this text from the perspective of the child, centered for the first time in your memory and invited to fully grasp the beauty and enormity of someone finally naming you as the beloved person you are?