

9-19-21
Pentecost 14
Mark 9:30-37

Servant? Leader?

I know that there are a lot of things about what I do that nobody understands. I don't drink much coffee, but I've assembled a pretty good collection of coffee mugs through the years. One of them sits on my desk and holds pens and pencils. Someone gave it to me years ago. On one side it has a picture of someone talking to the preacher. On the other side, it reads, "Is yours a full-time job or do you only work on Sundays?" I know something like that is how some people feel about the preacher's work. I hope some of you know better.

A big part of what I do in addition to the one-day-a-week things that people see involves getting people like you to do things. We'll participate in a step in the process of doing that at the end of this service. The words Presbyterian and committee are pretty far away from each other in the dictionary. They really ought to be closer together, because they are all but synonymous. It usually takes at least a couple of committees and a board to get things done the way we do them. That means we need leaders of lots of different kinds.

You've heard as much as you want to about the time I spent as an organizing pastor for new churches. One more story. Starting a church from the ground up is both exciting and frightening. The very first Sunday we had worship at the church in Huntsville, Deanna and Kyle (who was in middle school then) and I got to our rented space early and sat up chairs in the lobby of a dance studio. We had no idea who, if anybody, might show up. They did. And after only about a couple more Sundays when the three of us slung those chairs around, we arrived one Sunday to find Lee and Larry Anderson waiting for us in the parking lot.

“We thought you could use some help,” they said. They became friends of Kyle’s that very Sunday! And in another week or so, others showed up to help, and pretty soon what had taken an hour or so to do got done in just a few minutes. In time, Larry became an elder in that new church, and Lee became the church treasurer. Those other folks who showed up to help became leaders, too. But their service to the church began because they saw something that needed doing and offered to do it.

Vanessa was another person who stepped up early there. We didn’t have Sunday School when we first started. But we knew that if we wanted to attract families and if we wanted to grow we’d have to start one as quickly as we could. Again, the primary leadership team for that church started out as Deanna, Kyle, and me. Vanessa and her three kids were there that first Sunday, and they came back the second one, and I think it was the third Sunday we met together, she came to me at the end of the service and said, “I know you don’t know me, but I’d like to help somebody get a Sunday School started. I’ve got these three kids, and I see others in the group, so how can we get something going for them?” It turned out that Vanessa was the daughter of a Methodist minister and had taught Sunday School most of her adult life before her family moved into this new neighborhood. She didn’t look like a child molester or a chain saw killer, so that next week, she and Deanna and I sat down and made plans to begin a Sunday School class for children in one of those mirror lined rooms they have in dance schools. One of Vanessa’s kids broke one of those mirrors a few weeks later. Nobody was hurt, but some folks weren’t happy when I sent the Presbytery a bill to replace it. Vanessa never became an elder, but she and Deanna taught that Sunday School class for several years and Vanessa helped with children’s events for a long time. The few youth we had to start with were all Kyle’s age—middle school, and if we needed any sign that God was in the beginning of that church, Chris and Carla stayed after worship one day to say, “We really like middle school kids. Can we do something with them?” Now you know and I know that even God has days when middle school

kids are hard to love, but God sent us people who really did love them, and before long, not only were they meeting in another of those mirrored rooms at the dance center, but they also began to meet on Sunday evenings at Chris and Carla's house for pizza and fun stuff.

Other people in that congregation emerged as leaders of different types. Huntsville, as most of you know, is a military and an engineering town. I laugh and say that you have to be either an engineer or a Colonel to live there, or both. We quickly identified some of those types, people with organizational skills, people with management experience, people who were more used to giving orders than they were doing things. Some of them became invaluable to us as we got organized, too. One day, we were in the midst of some study or activity of some kind and one of those in-charge types was having some difficulty not being in charge. When we were standing around after the meeting broke up, another fellow came to me and said, "Looks like you've got plenty of people who want to run this thing. I just want to be a worker bee!"

That's the way most of us think about leadership. There are those who lead, and then there are worker bees. There are those who plan and manage, and there are others who get things done. That works in some settings, but Jesus seems to think about leadership differently than we do.

You heard the story today about a time that Jesus was trying to help his closest friends understand what was about to happen among them. By this time, he and those friends had spent lots of time together and had had lots of different kinds of experiences. Now it was all about to come to a head. They were on their way to Jerusalem where Jesus knew that they would face things there was no good way to prepare them for. But he had to try. So he told them, as clearly as he could about what would happen there. He would face judgement as a result of some unjust accusations against him, and, when that was all over, he would die. But he would return from the dead and usher in a new age.

Imagine hearing that as they did. Not from our vantage point where we know he's talking about Easter, which is a glorious celebration for us that even Covid couldn't stop the past two years. But from right in the midst of the action. There is no way they could have understood what he was saying.

Of course, you might expect them to listen a bit and try to figure out something about what he meant. But they apparently had other things on their minds. Of course they were afraid to ask him many questions. We find out that they were more interested in who was going to be top dog in this new order Jesus had come to usher in. We're not told who the leaders were in that conversation, but since there are some of those twelve that we have to run to the Bible to look up names for, we can pretty much assume that it was some of the big name guys—Peter, James, John, the ones who were always in the middle of things who were jockeying for leadership roles. You've seen that kind of jockeying before, but we probably don't expect to see that from these we know as disciples and saints. Remember, they're people just like we are.

You'd think by now that Jesus would have found some way to get in these guys' heads a little better. Help them understand what they were involved in. And that's exactly what he does. And, of course, he does it in a way that none of them or us see coming.

What Jesus does next is one of the things that most of us who know this story never forget.

Children were not the center of the world that they tend to be in our culture back in that day. Seen and not heard is a kind way to describe their lot, but it really went far beyond that. Children had no standing in that society. Families didn't plan their schedules around where the kids needed to be or what they wanted to do. Families didn't spend money they didn't have on lessons or groups or teams or any of the other things that were supposed to prepare their children for bright and prosperous futures. Children were a blessing because they could work and because they would eventually be able to provide for and care for

their parents in a culture with no Social Security, pension, or any other kind of safety net for the old. That would all work out as it should, but when they were children, they were children. They did as they were told, and carried very little weight in decision-making.

I'm not sure why children were even in the crowd that gathered around Jesus and the disciples. Some must have come with their parents. Some may have been there to beg before Jesus and his bunch showed up there. Surely, when this strange group of adult men came into whatever space that was, those children very likely made themselves scarce. If those guys wanted something, they'd most likely send some of those kids for it. Water. Food. They carried things to other people all the time. They certainly would not have expected that whatever this bunch of guys was doing would have anything to do with them. That's why it shocked everybody when Jesus reached out and took one of those kids and sat him down right in the middle of that crowd of people.

As I've read and re-read this story over the past several days, that's the image that intrigues me most. I wonder what that child must have thought. Even though we may intellectually understand the difference in attitudes toward children in that day and ours, I'm still not sure we grasp the vulnerability of those children. They really did live as the whim of adults. Those who were fortunate to have good and stable homes and families may have fared better than others, but to be grabbed up by a strange man and sat down in the middle of a bunch of other strange men must have been a frightening experience for that child and for the others who were thankful they weren't the one Jesus took. Just as we can't understand a place like Afghanistan where many don't see the benefit in educating girls, it's hard for us to wrap our minds around what those children meant to their culture.

But Jesus took that child, that powerless, vulnerable, insignificant child and said, "This is what you need to become if you're going to be what I'm talking about." "Whoever welcomes a

child like this,” he said, “welcomes me. And whoever welcomes me welcomes God who sent me.”

We’ll find out next week that the disciples, and probably no one else there that day either, didn’t have a clue what Jesus was talking about. Just like back there on the road, they can’t get outside their perceptions about who and what matter and who and what never will long enough to hear the world-changing things Jesus has to say.

Welcome a child? Nobody welcomed a child in that day. Call for them to do something? Sure. Let them know when they didn’t do it right? Absolutely. But welcome them into conversations and decisions and things that mattered? It just wasn’t done.

But we can do what those disciples wouldn’t or couldn’t do. We can set all that power grabbing and attention seeking that will be waiting for us when we leave this place aside and hear what Jesus said. We’re different here. We’re called to be different wherever we go. The people you elect to serve on this committee today will do what that group does every year. They’ll nominate people who will serve on the Session for the next three years. Some of them will likely have been there before. Some of them may be new. But they’ll bring us a slate of people they think need to be both servants and leaders in this congregation. I’ll meet with them to get their work started, and after they have politely listened to me and the Book of Order, I’ll leave them to do their work. I hope when they get to that point, they remember this story. I hope they remember this strange thing Jesus did—taking a child and setting him in the middle of all those people who wanted to be important and then telling them, “This is what you need to be if you want to be first in my kingdom. Those who think they’re first will be last, and those who think they don’t matter will wind up running things.”

That was a strange way to do business then. Nobody understood it. Many still don’t. But at least we’ve had these few minutes to think about it and to decide maybe it’s worth a shot, maybe we should listen to what Jesus said instead of what we’ve

decided is more important. Doing things differently than the world does was a big part of what Jesus came to empower us to do. Maybe we need to give it a try. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

Prayers of the People

God of abundant mercy, grace, and power, through the gift of your Word and all the ways we experience it, you show us that there is no reliable source of help and strength but you. We hear about your faithfulness every time we gather for worship and hear your Word read and proclaimed. We experience your faithfulness every time we cry out in prayer or in anger or in thanksgiving. And in Jesus Christ, your Word made flesh and sent to live among us, we see that same faithfulness giving us the direction we need, showing us that when we bring our joys and our concerns to you they will be heard because they matter. Thank you for the gift of your faithfulness to us in all of life.

We pray today in the midst of a world in which we fully participate, a world that too often takes its cues from people and things other than you. And those cues have too often brought us to war and hate, to violence and oppression, to distrust and disobedience, to fear and division. We pray for the courage to turn away from all who speak contrary to your will and to follow your Word and your will for us and for all people.

We pray for the brokenness that characterizes too much of life. For broken relationships, broken promises, broken systems that are supposed to care for people, broken patterns that cannot hold new ideas. Forgive us for the things we have broken. Heal them and us and the things others have broken that cause pain for us. Bring us back to healing and hope.

We pray for our children and for the children of the world. Jesus called them first in God's heart and kingdom. Help us to welcome them and the ideas and challenges they bring. Help us to both teach them and to learn with and from them. In our families and in the church, help us to live as your family, where all have value and purpose.

We pray for the sick. We rejoice with those who are recovering, and we continue to pray for those who may not. The numbers of those who continue to suffer and those who die with this virus continue to mystify and concern us. Help us to do what we can to give life and hope to all of us, even if it means we might give up something we think we're entitled to. Guide those who continue to care for the sick, even at their own peril. Lead those who do the research that will help us avoid this kind of pandemic again. And guide us to follow science over emotion, truth over gossip, and hope always.

Comfort all who grieve in these days. Be with Rebecca's family and with the family of others who have passed from this life to the life you have prepared for them, for us, and for all the faithful.

We believe in you, O God, and in your justice and mercy. We trust in your power to heal what is broken within and among us and to restore all that is broken in this world while we wait for the world that is to come. We believe that you want us to know peace, in spite of our insistence on other goals. We bring these prayers to you, hopeful that, in them, you will hear things you can honor and grant and that you will change our hearts and bend our wills to yours. We pray all these things, and we strive to live our lives in the name of Jesus, who loves us and who taught us all to pray when he said: *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 for ever and ever. Amen.*