

September 23, 2018 Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Pastor Carolyn Albert Donovan

Peace Lutheran Church – Austin, Texas

GOSPEL

Mark 9:30-37

The holy gospel according to Saint Mark, the ninth chapter.

Glory to you, O Lord.

³⁰[Jesus and the disciples went on] and passed through Galilee. He did not want anyone to know it;³¹for he was teaching his disciples, saying to them, “The Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him, and three days after being killed, he will rise again.” ³²But they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him.

³³Then they came to Capernaum; and when he was in the house he asked them, “What were you arguing about on the way?” ³⁴But they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another who was the greatest. ³⁵He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, “Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.” ³⁶Then he took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms, he said to them, ³⁷“Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.”

The gospel of the Lord.

Praise to you, O Christ.

Not that long ago...in a place not too far away...

There were some people sitting around a long rectangular table...

in a room just a bit too small for it...

They were talking about the business of being the church of God.

Now...they loved Jesus...they read his words and tried to follow him...

Today, though, they couldn't seem to agree on which direction to go.

You see...they had a little patch of the world

over which God had given them some temporary control...

And it seemed that the beautiful music...raised up as an offering of praise...

And the meeting of the children for a celebration...

Well...they were both meant to happen

on the same little patch of God's good Creation...at the same time...

Deciding which of the two would get to occupy that space...

who was maybe the most important (though no one would say it like that)

led to a meeting that ended in a combination of

shouting, and tears and shocked silences.

And as the meeting ended...the preschoolers walked past in the hallway...
just the very tops of their heads visible through the window...
singing their table grace song on the way to lunch.
But no one really noticed.

The more things change...the more they stay the same...
The followers of Jesus now are the followers of Jesus then.
And with a little bit of catching up on fashion and hygiene...
You could put any given apostle in a church staff meeting...or council meeting...
and they would maybe feel right at home.

Deciding who gets to occupy space...who is maybe the most important...
Who is great...and who is not...
Seems like something we still like to talk about,
whether we would use those words or not.

Of course...God's dream is for all of Creation to flourish and live in abundance...
But as soon as Creation took its first breaths...
and there was a space we were told not to go...
we began to feel territorial about it...even with God.
And we started breaking the world into pieces that were mine or yours...
or at least not "theirs..." anyone's but "theirs."

We've gotten it so wrong so often.
For those joining our book club today, as we begin reading "Mighty Be Our Powers,"
we hear about the struggle for peace in Liberia
and how that was another time
when men wanted to cut up the world to claim parts of it
as monuments to their greatness...
even if they had to cut up women and children
and history and beauty in order to claim it.

They would show they were important
by occupying all the space they could sever from others seeking
to live their lives...to bless their food...to find a place in this world.

So often, we go so wrong.
But sometimes things go right...
Sometimes we hear children sing their prayers...

or see the child placed among us
and understand that she is a sacrament...
that we are closer to God and what matters than we have ever been.

Today, Linda Parsells is commissioned as a Stephen Leader...
one who leads Stephen Ministers in their work.
I think this is another example of a ministry that understands
what Jesus wants us to choose
when we can try to assert our greatness on the one hand...
or honor the vulnerable on the other.

Stephen Ministers do not seek to occupy as much space as they can claim.
They offer the rare gift of space that others can fill
with their sorrow, their confusion, their loneliness...and... their joy...
To truly listen is to stop trying to take up space long enough
to honor the holiness in others that can be seen and heard and felt
when we quiet ourselves enough to perceive it.

In a similar way, the Listening Team
for the Missional River journey we are on as a congregation this year
has been working to learn this, too, I think.
We just finished a day of learning yesterday...
and I think our most profound learning on the journey so far
may be how long it takes...to really listen.
How much time and space we need
to hold as sacred to honor God's voice in each other.

Perhaps this is one way that it makes sense
that Jesus put a child in the midst of the friends
who were arguing about who is the greatest.

A child is always the least and most important person in the room all at once.
They have nothing to offer, nothing to earn.
And yet, they require time and care...
so much more time and so much more care
than can be accounted for by the tiny space they occupy.

Here in this place we might worry sometimes about the space we occupy here
on Farm to Market 620 in the year 2018.
We might wonder about our future or want to assert our importance.

We might worry about whether we will continue
to find the resources to keep being who we are...or who we are supposed to be.

I wonder if, underneath their bravado...
the disciples weren't arguing about who was the most important
because each of them was desperately afraid that they weren't.
I think that can be us sometimes.

But, you know what?
I have every confidence in the good news of God in Christ Jesus...
that we have been put here for a purpose
as important as anything that has ever been...
to declare to everyone who fears not having a place that they matter...
not just to us...but to the One who set the planets in their dance.

And right now, as much as ever...
I am almost shivering at the possibilities
about how we can bring that promised truth to bear in this place...
in this time...for those who need it so much.

If you do not feel like someone who is great today...
if you do not feel able to even care for your own needs,
more or less the world's...
if you have not been treated as a reliable witness even to your own life...
if you have been cut into pieces by the ones trying to claim a right
to the space taken up by your life...
Then remember the disciples arguing on the road...
and the child Jesus brought them...
and who was closest to the kingdom.
Because it was the one who is like you.

I know that when we hear the children sing their blessings...
when we truly listen to one another...
when we look for those who are not permitted to take up space...
when we hear the stories of the people whose lands and lives
have been chopped into pieces for the sake of the ones
who want to claim greatness as something they have conquered...
when we see the children Jesus has put in our midst...
and know that God's dream comes to life in them...
and that they are also us...

Then...then the great dream of God...the kingdom...is at our fingertips.
And everything is possible.

Thanks be to God. Amen.