

September 19, 2021
Mark 9:30-37
The Rev. Dr. Mark W. Jennings

I've shared before that when I was young, my family would often make the trek from our home in Colorado to come back to Michigan to visit relatives. Some years we would come back for Christmas and we would stay with my grandparents on the farm between Mason and Eaton Rapids.

As a boy, I used to really look forward to these visits. I have 12 first cousins on my dad's side, most of whom lived within 10 miles of my grandparents, so we always had a house full of kids running around.

One of the highlights of those visits was the holiday dinner. My aunts and uncles and many of the cousins would pack into my grandparent's small house and have a great time playing games, listening to my dad play the banjo and singing songs.

But... then came the dinner. I mean, the food was always great, but... the problem was that most of my cousins were older than me and you know what that means... No matter how old I got, as soon as we sat down to eat, my seat was at the "Kid's table."

I hated that.

My brother Jeff is only a year older than me, but he always got to sit at one of the adult tables.

While we—my younger siblings and a handful of cousins-- sat at two little card tables in the kitchen, away from the adults...

where we couldn't see what was going on or what they might be laughing at.

And worse, Granny had a rule that we couldn't get up from the table until the adults were finished.

And they took forever.

Seating arrangements...

We've all been to wedding receptions. And we've all had that nervous anticipation of picking up your place card and seeing where you have been placed.

Who are you sitting with? Do you know them? Are they easy to talk to?

And worse, what if you know no one and you'll have to make polite conversation?

And what about the location of the table? Are you in a prominent location, in close proximity to the bridal party?

Or are you in the back and you find yourself sitting next to the wedding photographer and the hired musicians? That table always gets invited up to the buffet last!

We're vain creatures, aren't we? We want to feel important...

Now let me ask you, and please don't raise your hand: how many of you have secretly switched places so you could be with someone you prefer?

You know, the church used to have assigned pews. It was very common for parishioners to buy their pew. The more you paid the closer to the front you were. And naturally, the ones in the front also had the most say, the most power. (Except for Presbyterians who I think would pay the greatest amount of money to sit in the back.)

Placement matters because where you're placed gives you more or less power. The closer to the Host, the bridal party, the minister, the greater your standing with the one in control.

And this is true for Jesus as well.

In today's scripture, Jesus and the disciples have been traveling to Capernaum, back to their home base, and when they come to the house in which they stay (probably Peter and Andrew's house), Jesus asks them, "What were you arguing about along the way?"

An uncomfortable question... Uncomfortable enough that it seems to silence them.

They are afraid to tell him their response—

For they had argued with one another about who among them was the greatest. If Jesus is their leader, then who would be second in command? Who would be his closest advisors? Who would have power?

Remember last week? Just before this they had affirmed that Jesus was the Messiah, the Christ, the Anointed One, the one sent by God to be the leader of God's people?

Now, if Jesus was all that, if Jesus was that great, then weren't they in pretty good shape too?

As his followers, as his main men, weren't they going to be pretty powerful also?

But would they share that power? Or would some be more powerful than others?

Who gets to sit at the Adult table? Who is seated with the parents of the bride? Who has secured the front pew?

And will some be relegated to a card table in the kitchen?

When one affirms Jesus as the Messiah, as the Lord, then certain questions follow.

And over the next few weeks we are going to look at some of those questions...

But, today, we are exploring what power and greatness is really about when you are a disciple of Christ. And, first, we should recognize what a radical thing Jesus has just done in this passage.

In first century, Roman society, children were viewed as socially inferior and to most people they were invisible. But children did serve a purpose, of course. If you were a farmer, they provided more hands in the fields. If you were upper-class, they were one's legacy, a family line's security in an uncertain future.¹

But until they became adults, children were basically ignored. They were non-persons and they had no rights. They were the property of their fathers, who could do most anything they wanted with them. And lest you think this was only true in Biblical times, it really wasn't until the last 100 years or so that Western society acknowledged children as a separate demographic, a group in need of protection from abuses, such as child labor.

There were children in the house with Jesus that day. And he sees them, and declares them to be important.

“Whoever welcomes one such child in my name, welcomes me.” Jesus says, and then he takes the child into his arms.

He goes on “You were arguing about who is the greatest? You were arguing about who will be closest by my side, who will have power.

But I have chosen a child.

For

Whoever wants to be first among you must be servant of all. What you do for the least of these, my friends, you do for me.

¹ Gundry-Volf, Judith M. “Child, Children.” *New Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*. Vol. 1. pp. 588-90.

You may not have noticed but there are children here today (as they were last week) in the Gull Prairie Room where our parents are cooperating in taking turns leading the children in a Sunday School lesson. We miss their presence in the sanctuary but until they can be protected or our COVID numbers go down dramatically, we have to keep our distance, to protect them.

A friend and I were talking earlier this week about wearing masks in the church.

I said we had gone back to mask wearing for all indoor meetings at the church and for worship. He said that he had done the same thing at their church. And together we agreed that we were following CDC recommendations.

Later I thought: Is that why we do it? Do we wear our masks because the CDC or the department of health is currently recommending it for people in Michigan?

OR

Do we do it because we know that even though we are vaccinated, there is still a chance with the delta variant that we could get COVID?

OR

We do it because we know that there are some vaccinated among us who are immuno-compromised, and, we do it because we know there are some among us—including children—that can't get the vaccine. We do it because they are vulnerable and we love them and want to take care of them. They are the ones without power and as Jesus said, what we do for the least of these we do for him.

Our role as the church is to always look out for the vulnerable, the ones without power, the poor, the refugee, the frail, the children, creation...

I've shared before that as a child, I was bitten quite severely by a dog and consequently became very afraid. And if we went to visit the house of a friend, my parents would have to call ahead and ask if they have a dog and, if so, request that the dog be put outside for the time that I was there.

Musa Dube, who is professor of New Testament at the University of Botswana notes, "When we welcome people—visitors and friends—in our homes, we make efforts to make them comfortable and to give them the best, as well as to ensure that they are safe. In Setswana they say "Dintsa dibogilwe" meaning (all dogs are tied up), which means no harm will come to you as a visitor; you are truly welcome and safe."²

You are welcome and safe here. All are welcome and safe...here.

² Dube, Musa W. *Feasting on the Gospels: Mark*. p. 283.