



Sermon

Mark 9:30-37

September 20, 2009

16th Sunday After Pentecost

Gloria Dei (Old Swede's) Episcopal Church /

Historic St. George's United Methodist Church Joint Service

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Gettin' Down

Then [Jesus] took a little child and put it among them; and taking [the child] in his arms, he said...

"Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me."

Mark 9:36-37

"It's a beautiful day in the neighborhood,
a neighborly day for a beauty,
would you be my, could you be my,
won't you be my neighbor?"

Is there anyone who doesn't recognize this theme song? The invitation to *Mister Roger's Neighborhood* on PBS continues to broadcast unconditional love and acceptance to generations of American children and the adults they grow-up to be.

If you've never seen *Mister Rogers*, then check your pulse. You might be dead. Remote-controlling your way through the channels, if you've never paused to take-in his neighborhood, you're definitely poorer for it. I've read about college students tuning in daily, yearning to experience someone looking them in the eye, speaking in a caring, affirming voice. I've experienced this myself, in the middle of a bad day, how hearing Fred Roger's warm, receptive tone picks me up.

My former Bishop, Peter Weaver knew Fred Rogers personally. He tells a story that makes me think of the scene with Jesus and the child told in today's Gospel. A group of adults and children were standing at an elevator. The door opens and to the great surprise of those waiting to get on, out walks Fred Rogers himself. The

adults greeted him with awe, recognizing a TV star. But Mister Rogers completely ignored them and stooped down to address the children. Only after he had spoken to each child did he stand up and speak to the tall people. This, said Bishop Weaver, was the way it always was with Fred Rogers.

On a day when Gloria Dei (Old Swedes') Episcopalians and St. George's United Methodists get together the circle widens more: remember, Fred Rogers was a Presbyterian minister. Thinking of him makes me proud of my line of work. I hope remembering him finds us all pleased and proud to be Christian. Fred Roger's neighborhood was and is a Christ-like place of ministry: a tall person stooping to see the world at the same level as children.

When was the last time you stooped down for any amount of time? Don't tell me about bad knees either. If you have sat in a wheel chair, you've experienced a different perspective. The world is a different place when you are lower in it – physically socially or economically.

Have you ever seen a lost child in a crowd? Have you ever been a lost child in a crowd? Have you ever been somewhere where you don't speak the language and desperately need to communicate? Have you ever waited with someone at court or applying for social services? I'm thinking of some of the stooping times and places where the world we thought we knew, the things we thought were just-so are NOT; where the points of view we held, were forced to change. I'm thinking of the times and places where, regardless of degrees,

status or station, people meet us with that “What is he/she doing here?” look in their eyes.

When was the last time you stooped down for any amount of time? By necessity OR choice.

Jesus’ disciples stood tall. Or thought they did. We heard this in last week’s reading when Jesus asked them “Who do YOU say that I am?” Remember how Peter blurted out the right answer and got scolded for it. Apparently calling Jesus “Christ” and “Lord” is easier said than done, involving some reorientation by those who intend to mean what they say.

Last week, Jesus told them about who he was – the one who suffers and serves. This week we get an example of what that image looks like for his followers: Jesus put a child in the middle of the room. Then cradling the little one in his arms he said, “*Whoever embraces one of these children as I do, embraces me, and far more than me – God who sent me.*” (Mark 8: 36-37, The Message)

The posture of a disciple. Jesus called them aside and told them to stoop. They bent down but Jesus said lower. When they seemed to be having trouble comprehending, he stooped all the way to the ground to be at the level of a small child, a person invisible to the taller world.

I heard Methodist Bishop Roy Nichols talk about a very unique children’s Sunday school room in one of the churches in his area. What made this room remarkable was the door, not the usual six-seven foot door but one four-five feet high. The effect of this special door – when an adult enters this room, they have to stoop. Over the door was this scripture: “*Unless you become as a little child, you cannot enter the kingdom of heaven....*” (Matthew 18:4 & Luke 18:17). I can still hear Bishop Nichols, in the rhythmic cadence of a black preacher: “Jesus wants people to GET-DOWN. You’ve got to get-down see world from a new point of view.”

Here’s the world from a “new” point of view – new for me anyway. In Jesus and his disciples’ world there were no Gerber Babies, Shirley Temples, Abigail Breslins or Haley Joe Osments (before

they hit puberty and go from cute to awkward, that is). There were no poster children, no *Kids Say The Darndest Things*. Not one *No Child Left Behind* program. In antiquity, abandonment of children was commonplace. Childhood was a time of terror – infant mortality rates of 30%, another 30% by age six, the remaining 60% by age sixteen. Children were on par with slaves, their greatest value being Social Security for their elders. If there is any common ground with our time, it is how children are still the first casualties of war, famine, disease and dislocation.

So when Jesus took the little child, placed it in the middle of the room, it wasn’t the loveable kid in *Home Alone* he presented them. Jesus put his arm around someone vulnerable, unlovable, undesirable and socially unfit. And that’s if you were a boy!

Jesus called them aside, like worship and Eucharist calls us aside again today and says in a word: “Stoop.” Jesus sees us straining to bend and says: “Lower.” Jesus sees our standing stiff-legged, tall; Jesus hears our loud voices, sees our busy work and puts someone in smack dab in the middle of us, someone who works hard as a slave but isn’t recognized, someone lives at the lowest rung in her family, or in his world. “YOU’VE got to get-down,” Jesus says to us. Lower. Lower.

Let me tell you about some of the most amazing “get-down” people I know. Barb and Roz, are two women who don’t have biological children but open their home, adopting children with special needs. Matter of fact, Barb felt called to the pastoral ministry in the United Methodist Church but was strongly discouraged back in the day when the church was less than encouraging to women entering ministry. And women living together! How would they say it here in South Philly? “Fuhgeddaboutid!” (Forget about it!)

But like it so often when God calls – despite systems, boards and agencies, or the likes of biblical principalities and powers complicating things – when one door closes and another opens. God keeps calling until someone

answers. Barb and Roz answered God's calling by opening their lives and home to take sick children and make them well – cerebral palsy children, crack addicted babies, learning-disabled children, children with AIDS. UN-adoptable children.

How's that for mission and ministry: take sick children and make them well? Take them to the hospital. Take them to therapy appointments. Take them to doctors and counselors. Stay up all night with someone else's children through all kinds of sickness – including weaning babies off birth mother's addictions. Teaching these children walking, talking and table manners. Renovating your house, remodeling your home to be fully open and accessible.

Every picture of this family – smiles to make a dentist proud – you just hope your allegedly "normal" clan might beam as brightly. Funny isn't it. Barb, discouraged from pastoral ministry, lives, presides and serves at table more like the image of God's heavenly banquet than most ordained, in most churches most Sundays; way more than I do with clerical collar, robes, embossed diplomas and certifications. One can only hope when the time or need for getting-down comes in your and my life, ministry or mission, we'll know the grace, joy and integrity of faith that Barb and Roz stoop to.

I used to read Aesop's fable about the lion and the mouse to my kids at bed time. Remember the story. The king of the jungle takes an afternoon nap and is disturbed from regal slumber by a tiny mouse. The lion roars. The mouse wets himself fearing he'll be a mid day snack. But in a moment of amazing grace, the lion releases the little one. The mouse promises that someday he'll save the lion. The king of beast roars with laughter. "I may be small, but I can act tall," sings the mouse walking away. "I may be small, but I can act tall," was the refrain in the particular version of the story I read.

One day the lion falls prey to a hunter's net. The more the lion tries to escape the more tangled he becomes. How will the lion get free? It's the tiny

mouse who chews through the ropes and breaks the snare. "I may be small, but I can act tall," the mouse sings as creatures great and small walk together into the sunset.

We won't soon forget the pictures of the father, daughter and now famous foul ball incident at Citizens Bank Park this past week. Steve Montefore took his three year old daughter Emily to the Phillies game. Dream seats. Just above home plate.

Then every fan's dream came true, a foul ball comes right to him. Steve reaches over the rail. Catches the ball. Emily takes in all the excitement from her seat next to Dad. Overjoyed he shares the souvenir with her. He hands her the ball.

What does she do? What any little girl or boy who has ever played catch, or Phillies with Dad would do. Emily did what came naturally - she throws the ball. Threw it! Threw it away. Dad's dream. Dad's keepsake. Threw it back into the crowd! DAMN!!!!

Dad gasps, not expecting this. The crowds gasps louder. Oh no! Who hasn't wanted to catch the one-chance-in-a-million foul ball. Emily sees the shock on her dad's face, hears the crowd and like any child overwhelmed goes right to guilt and shame. But before a tear can well up, in the blink of an eye, Dad's arms go around her. She's enveloped in a Daddy hug.

Beyond the alluring, heartwarming cuteness of this story, here is a poignant image of the gospel about Jesus and the child; how Steve stooped, how Steve got down where Emily was, how Steve acting, thinking, imagining small, stood tall enough to touch millions.

"She thought she did something wrong," he said. "She might have been afraid I'd reprimand her. She was so innocent. I wanted to reassure her." I WANTED TO REASSURE HER. She felt guilt and shame. She needed to be reassured.

Can you think of someone, some situation in your life where you might stoop down, bend a little lower, risk being more vulnerable. I can. God knows, I can.

That's why Jesus placed a child in the middle of the room, to be sure the ones who represent God's way in the world are assuring and reassuring the least and lowly, the frightened and fearful-they've-made-a mess-of things, the lost or lame, the little and insignificant-seeming, the enslaved and abused, the people who feel invisible to the world – that these little ones are the apple of God's eye, the body of the Lord's embrace. AND that the people representing God, WE are the ones who extend the embrace.

Welcoming these little ones! There's nothing particularly Episcopal or United Methodist about this message. Welcome these little ones. Whoever they are. Wherever they are. You know who they are in your life. You know who they are in your world.

According to the gospel and the stories of our lives, welcoming them isn't only a matter of welcoming Jesus and God, but like that lion and mouse, it may well be the very means of our salvation.

■■■ Amen ■■■