

## **Desperate Measures Part 3: The Desire for Greatness**

Scriptures: Mark 9:30-37, James 3:13-4:3, 7-8a

September 20, 2009

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### **Scriptures**

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#### **James 3:13-4:3, 7-8a**

Who is wise and understanding among you? Show by your good life that your works are done with gentleness born of wisdom. But if you have bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not be boastful and false to the truth. Such wisdom does not come down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, devilish. For where there is envy and selfish ambition, there will also be disorder and wickedness of every kind. But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy. And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace for those who make peace.

Those conflicts and disputes among you, where do they come from? Do they not come from your cravings that are at war within you? You want something and do not have it; so you commit murder. And you covet something and cannot obtain it; so you engage in disputes and conflicts. You do not have, because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, in order to spend what you get on your pleasures.

Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you.

#### **Mark 9:30-37**

They went on from there and passed through Galilee. He did not want anyone to know it; for 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." But they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him.

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

## **Proclamation of the Word**

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“Children should be seen and not heard,” the saying goes. And until the modern era, children were viewed differently. Jesus shocks his listeners again today with a visual parable. He places a child front and center among the disciples as he teaches them.

Jesus is always using everyday, earthy things to shock our sensibilities: A widow’s penny, crumbs under a table for the dogs, a fig tree, a couple of fish and a few loaves. He uses spit to loosen the tongue of the man who was deaf and could not speak plainly. He helps us imagine this kingdom reality by showing us signs of that kingdom.

Children in ancient times were not very helpful or useful to the family. They were not regarded with the same adoration and care as we now think of children. Anyone under 12 was not regarded as important or significant. After all, children were work, another mouth to feed. If they made it to adulthood they would then be seen as able to contribute something to the society. We cannot imagine the shock. Children were along the edges underfoot of the women, who would not even be in the room typically when the men were talking and teaching. Children were a sideshow...and to some a burden.

Thomas Aquinas, the ancient theologian, describes first century Palestine and the status of children. He writes that in a raging fire a husband was obliged to save his father first, then his mother, next his wife, and last of all his young child. (<http://www.ucc.org/worship/samuel/september-20-2009.html> attributed to John Pilch, *The Cultural World of Jesus, Sunday by Sunday, Cycle B*)

I bet the disciples didn’t even notice little Joseph or little Phoebe in the house at all. We do the same thing. There are people that are tossed aside or perhaps those we do not even see. They are people disregarded by society: the vulnerable, the helpless, the needy. We avert our eyes at the unbathed man with a duffel bag asking for food at the top of the exit ramp. We walk past the disabled person struggling to walk, too busy to get where we are going. Then sometimes the reality smacks you in the face and you cannot ignore it. On a first grade field trip with my child, we boarded the school bus. I noticed a teacher sharing her pack of crackers with another child. Mrs. Joiner turned to me and said, “This child is always hungry. I always pack extra food, because her parent will not get her to school for the hot breakfast.” Tragedy lives in the neighborhood. It is right down the street. Tragedy is not able to pull itself out of the pit. It has no means to do so.

Jesus takes the disregarded, invisible person of his day- a child- and sets that child right in the middle of the circle of disciples. Jesus had a thing for children. He took babies in his arms and blessed them. He knew how to hold them just so. Some liked rocking, some bouncing, and others loved to be tossed up into the air giggling. He never said, “Could you please get that kid out of here? We

have important things to do.” He knew they were important, too. I bet Jesus even liked the two year olds. He would love seeing children taking up the offering and greeting folks for worship. Jesus knows that in his kingdom, Children are not a sideshow, they are central.

Grandparents tease that they love having grandchildren because they can always send them home eventually when they (the grandparents) are worn out. People who take care of children know that you can be busy all day caring for them and not feel like you accomplished much. Little ones are messy and curious and move from task to task. You dress them and clean up. You feed them and clean up. You come up with an engaging art project and clean up. You pack for the park, play at the park, pack again, get home, and clean up. Children and caregivers fall exhausted in bed at night. Grandparents recover for a week after the grandkids have visited. Little ones are energy intensive.

They cannot work, vote, or provide much for the household or society. They receive and take more than they contribute.

And these are the ones that Jesus says welcome. When you welcome one like these you welcome me, Jesus says. When you are caring, unselfishly for someone who cannot reciprocate, you are welcoming me. And when you welcome me, you welcome the one who sent me, God, or as James puts it, “Draw near to God, and God will draw near to you.”

Isn't it nice that the Holy Spirit placed the Ashcraft family in our midst today. In Baptism, we welcome people into the faith and profess what God has done for us even before we can do for ourselves. That is why we baptize babies. Even before we can love God or neighbor in return, God claims us, accepts us, saves us, and calls us by faith through grace. The whole church professes together the faith that we will share with Claire as we promise to teach her, to welcome her even when she is fussy, to show her with our lives who God is. If you want to draw near to God, draw near to Claire. Get spit up on your shirt. Figure out if she likes to be looking out or held close on your chest where you can hear her little breaths. She is not a sideshow. Jesus puts her smack dab in the middle of us and says, notice her and welcome her in my name. If you want to draw near to God, draw near to Claire.

Barbara Brown Taylor puts it this way, “There will be no paycheck. Oh she may shout your name when she sees you and runs to hug your knees, but you cannot use her as a job reference and she cannot loan you a hundred bucks to get your car fixed. She is not good for anything like that. She is not in charge of anything, she cannot buy you anything, and she will not remember your birthday or invite you over for supper with friends. She has no status, no influence, no income, which makes her great in God's eyes. She is just what you need. And you, you are able to work on your own greatness by understanding that it is what you do

when no one is looking, with someone who does not count, for no reward, that ushers you into the presence of God.” (Barbara Brown Taylor, *Bread of Angels*, p.133)

In fact, welcoming little ones are all those including children who cannot repay you, whose need is greater than what they might give us in return. Remember, it is more blessed to give than to receive. In Biblical times, these are the ones that Jesus talks about most: the widow, the orphan, the foreigner, the stranger, the unemployed, the elderly poor, the shepherd, the peasant farmer, those possessed by demons, slaves, prisoners, the disabled person, the unclean person. If you want to be blessed, welcome them in Jesus name. In welcoming them you welcome Jesus and the God who sent him to walk among us. If you desire to see God, come any morning of the week and watch the 2, 3, and 4 year olds in our Preschool playing on the playground. Or find out how you can help at the Clemson Child Development Center or see if there is a need in our community to serve those who Jesus places in our midst.

Jesus says all this after a few of the disciples have been fussing over who is will be the greatest in God’s kingdom. I picture them like a family on a long car trip. The disciples in the back seat fussing under their breath. “I want to be Vice-President, says Brother James. I am going to be Secretary of State, says Brother John, you can have VP. Secretary of State has more power.” And now they are just mad, arms crossed over their chests, and not even speaking. The silence is deafening. Maybe they are too embarrassed to tell Jesus, because they should know better. Jesus already knows what is on their minds, but asks, “What were you boys talking about back there?” Busted!

The disciples have been arguing about greatness. They do not understand and they are afraid to ask. When Jesus talks about the Son of Man being betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him, the disciples really don’t want to ask questions, too afraid to ask. We all do that. It is easier to avoid things and people we do not understand than to ask questions. If we ask we may have to change or take responsibility. So the disciples are thinking about the rest of Jesus’ prediction, after three days Jesus will be raised into glory. Hallelujah- the story does have a good ending, but the disciples want to deny the hard stuff. They want to avoid the Brussels sprouts and get to the dessert. Who will be the greatest in the kingdom is their question. After all, they just went to the mountain with Jesus and had this visit from Moses and Elijah in what we call the Transfiguration. Since Jesus took Peter, James and John with him to show them this glorious vision, so he must have big plans for those three. Little do they know that it will be Peter who denies Jesus when the going gets tough.

Jesus takes his seat among them as all good rabbis do at this point and places a little child in their midst. He doesn’t berate them for not getting it. He is the wise and gentle teacher instead. Jesus redefines true power and true greatness. You disciples of mine, says Jesus, “whoever wants to be first must be last of all and

servant of all.” You want to be important than get down on the floor and play with a child. To be a servant is to be great.

This upside down kingdom is so strange. Have you ever seen or baked a Pineapple Upside Down cake? You spread the pineapples, butter and sugar and the bottom of the pan. The cake batter goes on top, and it bakes. When you take it out of oven and the cake has cooled, you literally dump it out. The kingdom of God is like that. In the end the pineapple which starts out at the bottom, ends up on top. Jesus turns things upside down. The last shall be first and servant of all.

Servants were people without much choice, but to serve. When your heart is touched by the love of God and your will is bent towards God’s intentions, you desire to serve. In this verse the word, “servant” is in Greek *diakonos*. If that sounds like any word you have heard before it is the root for our word “deacon.” A servant is a deacon. God calls disciples to serve and to be deacons. At Fort Hill deacons serve as our caring arm of our church. You will be hearing in a minute about your opportunity as a congregation to call upon those who will lead this church as officers- elders and deacons. You will elect those who will lead this church as servants of Jesus Christ. It is a strange concept for those outside the church sometimes, but the church calls Servant Leaders. The church calls people with a heart for God and a sincere desire to serve God by leading God’s church and loving God’s people. At the heart of discipleship is serving. And the church calls disciples to be servant leaders.

I remember a conversation with my mother who had been asked to be nominated to serve as elder of our home church. She had been asked several times, and each time she said no. That was twenty years ago when the church still put all the names on a ballot that anyone come up with and the congregation voted. I remember as a new young member, just circling people I knew from the 15 names. I had not thoughtfully and prayerfully chosen. I think my mother was for one horrified to be on that long list and to be rejected. But another thing was she never felt worthy of being an elder, she told me. The good news is that servant leaders are not worthy because they are perfect Christians, they are worthy because God who is great calls them to stoop down and to serve. Jesus says that disciples are those who serve and welcome little ones such as this child in my name. I think our current Nominating Committee along with your wise input will thoughtfully and prayerfully discern and call servant leaders.

Peter Steinke in *Healthy Congregations* presents much of the same thing in his contrast between "Clergy-Focused Congregations" and "Mission-Focused Congregations".

*I'm sure that there are many of the people in the pew who hear these words about being a servant of all; but they wouldn't consider themselves "ministers," because "that's the pastor's job." I've seen some congregational billboards, bulletins, and newsletters that list "pastor" and his/her name, and then "minister"*

*and say, "all the members of the congregation." There are just too many "little children" -- too many unimportant people in the world to welcome for us pastors to do it all.*

God is calling us to serve by welcoming all his little ones. When you welcome a child, you cannot stand up tall; you have to bend down, get on the floor at their level, look in their eyes, and open your arms.

It is in serving that we are ushered into the very presence of God. *Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you*, says the book of James. My mother figured out that she was called to serve and later became a deacon. Her role was to help recruit and prepare the 50 adults, children and youth who hosted, fed, and welcomed the homeless families who would make their home in our church building one week per quarter through a program called Interfaith Hospitality Network. To me, she was great because she knew how to stoop down, work hard, and welcome those families with children as Jesus would have us do.

A young rabbinical student asked the rabbi, "Rabbi, why don't people see God today as they did in the olden days?" The wise old man put his hands on the student's shoulders and said, "The answer, my son, is because no one is willing to stoop so low."

If you desire to be great, then stoop down and serve.

And if you want to see God, look for a 2 foot tall, unemployed, limited vocabulary, no net worth little child. If you are looking for him, you won't miss him!