

**September 20 2015 Year B Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost
Newport United Church of Christ**

Scripture Lessons~

Psalm 54

James 3:13-18

Mark 9:30-37

Sermon *Dead Last, But First*

In today's Gospel reading Jesus described his own vulnerability. In the starkest of terms as he tries to give his disciples some understanding of what lies ahead. The Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands, Jesus said and they will kill him. In these words Jesus underscores what we hear him saying quite openly to the disciples at the end of the eighth chapter of Mark's Gospel. The Son of Man must undergo great suffering and be rejected by the elders, by the chief priests, by the scribes and be killed. And now from Bethlehem to Calvary Jesus' life was a journey into vulnerability, of major burdens, and the cross-marked final hours. His life was lived in total vulnerability. He was vulnerable to everything that makes us human beings even to sin, although it was the sins of others and not his own eventually led to the cross. His ministry left him creditably vulnerable to people's needs and their hopes and their expectations as well. Jesus was open to their love and to their praise as well as he was victim to their rejection and persecution. He was no stranger to grief or pain or to hunger or thirst or to loving or to being loved. Even though he sensed the triumph of life and the resurrection; he was subjected to the ultimate vulnerability of death. His death was really death. His burial was in a real tomb, and that tomb was sealed and that tomb was guarded. In vulnerable, Jesus would not have been human and could not have worked to reconciled each of us to God's love. In Jesus it may be said that the invulnerable takes on invulnerability in order to redeem us from our vulnerability to our own human nature and even to death.

So is it any wonder that the disciples didn't really get what Jesus was saying about himself, get what he was saying about his mission. It seems a painful irony that just after Jesus shared words of his impending death that they were caught up in a raging argument about which one of them would be the greatest. Not only was Jesus vulnerable to being misunderstood by his closest friends and even by many of us in the modern day. But it turns he was vulnerable to their own ego; vulnerable to the disciples own personal ambition in life. I suppose it was natural for the disciples when anticipating the establishment of a kingdom to feel that way because they were closest to the king and they should have a special status in the new order to come. Surely they would be among the Who Who's' in the Kingdom

of God. It was not only the disciples who thought in these terms; remember the story about mother Zebedee who was anxious for her sons to be all that they could be. She was lobbying Jesus on their behalf to assure them of a top spot in Jesus' administration. You could almost imagine the twelve strong egos each clamoring to be heard; each other clashing with each other. If there is to be a kingdom, who is going to be the Chancellor? Who is going to become the Secretary of State? Who is going to be the Chief of Staff? I want to be the Secretary of the Treasury. I want to be the Secretary of Religion. How about me being the Ministry of Education and who in the end is going to rank over whom? Now don't get me wrong, I know good and well that ambition is not all bad. Jesus taught in other contexts that we are to invest, we are to utilize, and we are to develop our talents which we have received. Those talents are multiplied. If we do not list our gifts and develop them, we will lose those very gifts we were given. God's people are not to be passive about their gifts. We are to invest them wisely and energetically in the service of God. There is, you know well, a dark side to ambition which can silence our best principals, which can gag our consciousness, and can become an all consuming passion to satisfy its own goals. In 19th century American preacher and author Limon Abbot in his day wrote something that could be written of our own day. There are many men and women who are live in American whose idea of liberty to do precisely what they please, without the reference to the healthy, comfort or peace or life of other people. Who translate the noble word liberty with all of its implications with self-restrictions self-sacrifice into the anarchy of lawless self-assertion, by liberty they mean unlimited opportunity of being selfish, discourtesy, and disagreeable. By their idea of freedom they make life harder for their neighbors, they constitute the unresolved barbarism in a civilized society. They make popular government, unpopular for all who care enough for the people to be anxious for their morals, to be anxious for their manners. James speaks of this kind of humanly and spiritually destructive behavior when he writes the words, that George shared with us a few moments ago, where there is envy, where there is selfish ambitious, there will also be disorder and wickedness of every kind. And even churches can be caught up in who is greatest and this churchly ego is expressed in phrases that we use all the time. The largest membership of any UCC church in the entire denomination The biggest church building that was ever built; the highest average attendance in any church in town; the largest budget; the biggest Sunday school in the neighborhood. Along the way the Gospel might be compromised, the call to do good maybe muted by the variety of popular misconception or rationalized or ignored. Bigger wasn't necessarily better or was blessed by God when it came to television evangelist Jim Bakker the PTL Club for example. I spoke to one of my churches when they lost thousands of dollars when they bought into his timeshare scheme.

Jesus rebuked the disciple's power and position teaching and he was pretty direct. Whoever wants to be first has to be last, servant of all and we ask ourselves first will be last, great equals servant, such a cosmic reversal of values, leaves no place for posturing or priming or pea cocking along the pathway of our journey of faith.

Perhaps the greatest person and I have mentioned before, in the modern world that embodies this Christ-like attitude and vulnerability was Mother Teresa of Calcutta of India, founder of the Sisters of Charity, the Angel of the Streets, the friend of the dying and the outcasts. She was tiny plain woman if you ever saw a picture of her. She was a person of immense compassion, marvelous vision, and richest spirit of Christian reality. She was rewarded the Nobel Peace Prize for the working ministry with the nameless dying street dwellers of the city. She said no one should die unloved. She was well known for many other servant ministries which she inspired. Ministries to abandoned children, street dwelling families, unmarried young women, to the hungry, the hopeless, the sick, to the refugees which are timeless in our day. But she said something that takes me back at the present time as well, she said of herself I am unimportant, personality is unimportant I could not meet God if I didn't do this work. The illustration of this kind of servant is about; Jesus used an object lesson as you heard as George gave the lesson.

Jesus took a little child and he put it in their midst and taking it into his arms he said to his disciples, and said to them whoever welcomes one such child, in my name welcomes me whoever welcomes me does not welcome me but the one who sent me. Although the number of abused and neglected children in our society is an appalling however we at least maintain a comfortable fiction that our entire society loves children and reserves the highest place for them. There was no such system in the society in Jesus time, children had no legal rights, they had no privileges, they had no nothing guarantee in the law. Children had no standing what so ever. They were vulnerable. A child was defenseless. There was no children's defense act to intercede for child welfare. To welcome a child then and this was the essence of the object of the lesson was to welcome those who had no rights, those who have no standing, and those who were utterly vulnerable in society. This then was the life and ministry which Jesus calls each one of us today. This then is what it means to be servant of God; this is what it means to be the greatest in God's kingdom. This is what to look for in those who seek to be our leaders and who claim to be Christians This is what it means to be dead last and somehow first, dead last but somehow first in the kingdom of God. Amen.