

Newport United Church of Christ Service 9/30/2012

Scripture Lessons *Proverbs 22:1-2, 8-9, 22-23*
Mark 9: 30-37

Sermon *Dead Last, But First*

In today's gospel reading Jesus describes, I think his own vulnerability in some of the darkest terms possible. As he tried to give his disciples' some understanding of the things that lie ahead for him in the future. Jesus said the Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands and they will kill him. He doesn't say may kill him or that something may happen, he says they will kill him. And in these words Jesus underscores what we hear him saying quite openly at the end of the eighth chapter of Mark's gospel. Again he says the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders and the chief priest and the scribes and then be killed.

Now from Bethlehem to Calvary, Jesus life was in fact a journey into a sense of vulnerability. From his manger birth in Bethlehem across the marked final hours, Jesus lived, I think, in total vulnerability. He was vulnerable to everything that makes each one of us human beings, even sin. Although it was the sin of others and not his own sin, that finally did him in in the end. His ministry left him incredibility to people's needs and their expectations as well. He was open to people's love and praises as much as also a victim of their rejection and their persecution.

He was no stranger to grief or to pain, hunger or thirst, to loving and being loved during the course of life. Even though Jesus sensed the triumph of life and the resurrection he was subject to the ultimate vulnerability in his own death. His death was really a death, his burial was a real burial in a tomb and that tomb was sealed and it was guarded. An invulnerable Jesus would not have been human, and would not have worked to reconcile us to God. In Jesus then it may be said, invulnerable takes on vulnerability, in order to redeem us from our vulnerability to our own human nature and even to our own death.

Is it any wonder then that the disciples did not really understand what Jesus was saying about himself, his mission? Put yourself in their position, and think how you would have taken these words. It seems a painful irony that just after that Jesus had shared with his disciples' his impending death, they got caught up in a raging argument about which one of them was going

to be the greatest in the kingdom of Heaven. Not only was he vulnerable by being misunderstood by his closest friends, but even his friends were vulnerable to their own egos and their own personal ambitions where his life was concerned.

I suppose it was natural for the disciples' anticipating an establishment of a new kingdom, to feel they as close as they were to that new kingdom, should feel they should have some sort of special status in the new order. Surely they would be among the who's-who in the Kingdom of God, and it was not only the disciples' that thought in these terms. Remember back to Mrs. Zebedee, who staged in another part of the gospel, anxious for her sons to be all that they could be, lobbying Jesus on behalf to assure them the top spots, in his new administration. You can imagine those 12 strong egos each clamoring to be first in the kingdom of God.

If there was a kingdom, who was to be the Chancellor? The Secretary of State, or the Chief of Staff? Who would be Secretary of the Treasury? Who would be Minister of Religion in the new regime? Who would be Minister of Education? And by all means, let's decide who would have rank over whom? Don't get me wrong, ambition is not all bad. Jesus taught in other contexts, that we are to invest and to utilize it to develop each of the talents that God gives to us. And as we develop those talents we receive, those talents will in fact be multiplied.

But if we do not risk our gifts and their development, we will lose the very gifts that God has given to us. People are not to be passive about their gifts but to use them wisely and energetically in God's service. But there is, and you know this as well as I, a dark side to ambition which can silence all principals, gag conscience become and all consuming passion to satisfy our own goals in life. The book of James speaks of this kind of human spiritually destructive behavior. When James writes these words in his third chapter, "Where there is envy, where there is selfish ambition there will also be disorder and wickedness of every kind." And even churches can get caught up in this who's greatest game. You know that as well as I.

And this churchly ego is expressed in this kind of phrases – that is the biggest United Church of Christ congregation in the whole nation, the highest average attendance, the biggest budget, the biggest Sunday School, but then along the way the gospel might be compromised reaching out for these goals, the call to do good, may be in fact muted by a variety of misconceptions, that the world can be rationalized or ignored or even baptized, right into the life of the church. Bigger certainly wasn't better, or more blessed by God when it came to that PTL debacle with Jim Baker just a few years ago. Many of you may remember that, matter of fact I had one of the members in my

congregation who bought into the timeshares of Jim Baker's PTL club scandal.

Jesus rebuked to the disciples power and position seeking was direct then, whoever wants to be first must be last in servant of all. And that makes me ponder, first equals last and great equals servant, such a cosmic reversal of values, leaves no place for posturing or craning or peacocking along our pathway of our journey of faith at all. I think the greatest person in the modern world to embody this Christ like attitude in her vulnerability was Mother Teresa of Calcutta. She founded the Sisters of Charity, and the Angles of the Streets, the Friends of the Dying and the Outcasts, she was a tiny plain woman if you remember her before she passed, but she was a woman of immense compassion, a marvelous vision and the richest spirituality. She was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize, for her work in ministry, of nameless dying street dwellers in the city. No one should die unloved she said, and she was also well known for the many other servant ministries that she inspired. Many ministries to abandoned children, pavement dwelling families, particularly young women, the hungry, the homeless, the hopeless, and the sick in this world. But she said something very interesting, of herself she said "I am unimportant, in fact personalities are not important, and I could not meet God if I did not do this kind of work.

To illustrate what this kind of servant hood is about; Jesus used what you saw in the gospel lesson, an object lesson. The gospels say then he took a little child and put it among them, and taking it into 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 into this world.'" Now the number of abused and neglected children in our society is appalling we at least maintain a comfortable thought that our society loves children and reserves the highest place for them. But there was no such fiction in the Society of Jesus' day. Children had no legal rights, they had no privileges, and they had no guarantees by law. Children had no social standing whatsoever. A child was defenseless and dependent and completely vulnerable. And there was no children's defense fund to intercede on their behalf or child welfare. So to welcome a child was to welcome those who had no rights, those who had no standing, and those who are ultimately vulnerable in society.

This I think is the ministry that Jesus Christ calls each one of us to do. This is what I think it means to be a servant of God in the modern world. This is what it means to be greatest in God's kingdom. This is what it means by the standards of the world to be dead last, and yet this is how it means in the standards of the kingdom to somehow be first in the kingdom of God. I

think these are words for us to march by, as we go into the new week. And so together we say, Amen.