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Proper 20 B: Mark 9:30-37

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*We're Number One*

When I was serving a parish in Chicago, I participated in a 10 mile race in a suburb called Forest Park. After the 10 mile run was over, a second race was held, this one for children. The course was about 2 blocks long. Parents and other spectators lined up on either side of the street. The starting gun sounded and people broke out into wild cheers as little children came running down the street as fast as they could toward the finish line. One little girl was speeding along. Running quickly and confidently, she was making great time toward the finish line. As she came down the block I noticed that she was wearing the number 1 on her race bib. Well, no wonder, I thought. The low numbers usually go to people who have won in the past and to those who sign up early. No wonder she is number one. Soon after her, a couple of boys came along, running very fast. But I noticed that they too were wearing # 1. More and more children came past, and now we were into the part of the group that weren't speedy or certain. Some looked unsure about which way to head or why they were doing this. All were wearing #1. The race directors had done a very nice thing: every child was wearing the same number, the number that tends to mark importance and accomplishment, all were number 1 in that event, whether they broke the ribbon at the finish line or had to be coaxed by a parent into heading the right direction, or carried across the finish line. Number 1. I think that's the way God sees us too. We're all number 1 in God's eyes, all loved with the same abundant, no-strings attached, crazy, irrepressible love. All of us.

I don't know why that can be so hard for us to understand or accept -- why humans persist in treating love, even God's love, as something that may run out, something we have to earn, qualify for, or mete out on God's behalf like we're measuring sugar into a teacup, rather than staring at a big ocean full of love, and God keeps calling out to us, come on in, the water's great!

The disciples certainly struggled to understand the nature of God's love. Here it is manifest before them in the person and love of Jesus, and they still don't get it. He has just told them that he loves them so much that he is willing to die for them -- that he will die for them, and rise again. He

has been teaching them about the boundless, unending love of God that manifests itself in lives of service to others. But on the way home, they start comparing credentials. “Well, I must be the greatest – I’ve given up so much.” “You know he called me first, I must be the greatest.” “I had a great career going until Jesus called me, I must be the greatest. . .” “I’m #1.” “No, I am.” “Nuh uh. I’m #1.”

“So, guys, what are you talking about?” asks Jesus. “Uh . . . nothing.”

Jesus sits down and says, “Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.” Jesus isn’t just playing with words – he really wants the disciples to get the picture, so he gives them an image. Jesus takes a child in his arms and says, “This is what I am talking about. This is what the Gospel, this good news I’m living is all about: Whoever welcomes someone like this in my name welcomes me.”

The disciples’ jaws drop open. This is Jesus’ example of whom we are to serve and how we are to act? This child is the very opposite of influence. A child pays no taxes, has no resumé, has no physical strength, can earn nothing; and, in Jesus’ time especially, was society’s very definition of insignificance. In Jesus’ time, children were not viewed with sentimentality. I think we still do not do right by children today – we are still willing to let children in this world go hungry, go without proper medical attention, struggle through an inadequate education. But at least we talk better about children. We describe them as innocent, trusting, delightful, valuable, full of potential and promise. Not so in Jesus’ day. Children were the least, the unimportant, the marginal. They are completely dependent on those around them; they are vulnerable and weak; they need help; they are not self-sufficient. This child, says Jesus, is the model disciple in the kingdom of God.

See the picture? The child has nothing; but in being wrapped up in Jesus’ arms, the child has everything. Jesus is saying, like a child, allow yourself to be dependent on God. Jesus says, if you truly open yourself to the grace of the kingdom and stand before Christ as open to possibility as a child, if you come before God with the fervency of a toddler who wants nothing other than to be held, if you bring nothing with you besides your emptiness and your need, then something amazing will take place inside of you. You will actually become more open and more free. You will become

a lot less concerned about protecting your position in the world. You'll feel sillier and sillier about building your life around what others think and if they think you're the greatest. You will spend more and more time trying to understand others and their needs and how to reach out to them, without thinking what you might get in return. You will want to be part of a community that embraces weakness, even when it's your weakness, and knows that there is more than enough love to go around for everyone everywhere.

A priest with whom I am close (okay, it's my wonderful husband) said this about his interaction with some children God put in his midst:

“One of the most memorable sermons I ever preached was a children's sermon. I cannot remember now what the topic of the sermon was. In any event, I had prepared what I thought was a wonderful children's sermon talking about the lessons, relating to children's lives, time for children's reflections, maybe a craft. Great stuff. Well, I started into my homily and was immediately interrupted by a little boy who held up an arm with a plaster cast on it. I stopped and said, “Yes, Johnny, do you want to share something?” “I broke my arm.” “Oh, I'm so sorry to hear that,” I said, “it must have hurt, how long will you have the cast on?” and all those things you talk about. Then, I return to my prepared sermon on whatever the topic was, and then a little girl put up her hand. I stopped and called on her, and she said, “You know, one time, I broke my finger, and I had to wear a splint for four weeks.” And I said, “Oh I'm sorry to hear that sweetheart, that must have hurt, and is your finger okay now?” and it was, and then I tried to return to my sermon. Now lots of hands had gone up, and everyone had a story about some injury they had sustained at some point. “I banged my head and had to get stitches.” “I fell down and cut my knees.” And we even widened the circle to include stories about brothers or sisters or other kids they knew who had broken collar bones and had wisdom teeth pulled or sustained other bangs and bruises. By this time I had not gotten through any of my sermon, so I decided there was only one thing left to do. I rolled up my pant leg, and showed them the scar from my ACL surgery, the old kind that leaves a huge zipper down the front of your knee. And they were really impressed. I told them I had to wear a cast for six weeks and had to walk on crutches. And then a sort of reverent silence came over us, and we all shared a moment, I like to think, reflecting on how our common vulnerabilities had formed us into a community of the wounded. There we were sitting on the floor bound together by our common humanity and our human weakness,

and I felt the presence and peace of Christ. It may have been the best sermon I ever preached.”

I want to be a great rector. I want St. Anne’s to be a great parish. But I want us to be great in the only way that matters: with Jesus’ kingdom greatness: greatness that comes from embracing our dependency on Jesus Christ and following his footsteps, pouring ourselves out in love and service for others, shaping our life as a community in a cross-shaped way – offering prayer and praise to God and loving service toward others. I want this to be a place where we treasure the children and youth among us as disciples of Jesus Christ – now – not as future disciples, but as full participants in Christ’s body. I want this to be a place where those who teach children and lead children, where parents who do the hard work of bringing their children to worship and education, have their ministries of teaching and leading and bringing honored. I want this to be a church community where when people see us they say, See how they love one another.

May the greatness of Jesus be the only greatness we seek.

Amen.