

“Providing God’s Hospitality”

Mark 9:35b-50

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A Spiritual Director gathered a large group in a circle and told them to picture God at the center of the circle. The director invited them to move forward toward God. The group moved forward until they were shoulder to shoulder with each other. The director said, “You get closer to God when you get closer to one another.”

Jesus had been with the disciples for almost three years, teaching and modeling how to live and love. Jesus taught them how to invite outsiders into community, welcome the excluded, and serve. The disciples watched as Jesus forgave sins, healed, transformed, and renewed males and females, Jews and Greeks, rich and poor, the elite and the outcast. Jesus modeled radical hospitality reaching across every barrier to every person. Jesus enjoyed meals with all sorts of people. Jesus was humble, approachable and taught about humility. In light of this, how do you think Jesus felt when the disciples argued about which one of them was the greatest?

Mark 9:35b-37 “Jesus said, “Anyone who wants to be the first must take last place and be servant of everyone else.” Then Jesus put a little child among them. Taking the child in his arms, Jesus said to them, “Anyone who welcomes a little child like this on my behalf welcomes me, and anyone who welcomes me welcomes my Father who sent me.”

In those days a child was considered the lowest of the low with nothing to offer adults, anyone of importance would never waste their time with a child, yet Jesus hugged the child and urged the disciples to welcome children.

The disciples still don’t get it. They are seduced by prestige, craving approval, desiring success. They are eager to elevate themselves above others. They are frustrated that they were unable to heal someone like Jesus does, and envious that outsiders were able to heal like Jesus heals.

Jesus teaching to welcome the lowly, Jesus hugging a child, failed to make sense at all with jealous John. **Mark 9:38-50 “John said to Jesus, “Teacher, we saw someone using your name to cast out demons, but we told him to stop because he wasn’t in our group.” “Don’t stop him!” Jesus said. “No one who performs a miracle in my name will soon be able to speak evil of me. Anyone who is not against us is for us. If anyone gives you even a cup of water because you belong to the Messiah, I tell you the truth, that person will surely be rewarded. “But if you cause one of these little ones who trusts in me to fall into sin, it would be better for you to be thrown into the**

sea with a large millstone hung around your neck. If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. It's better to enter eternal life with only one hand than to go into the unquenchable fires of hell with two hands. If your foot causes you to sin, cut it off. It's better to enter eternal life with only one foot than to be thrown into hell with two feet. And if your eye causes you to sin, gouge it out. It's better to enter the Kingdom of God with only one eye than to have two eyes and be thrown into hell, 'where the maggots never die and the fire never goes out.' "For everyone will be tested with fire. Salt is good for seasoning. But if salt loses its flavor, how do you make it salty again? You must have the qualities of salt among yourselves and live in peace with each other."

God can work through anyone to fulfill God's will, to cast out demons, that is set people free, transform and renew them. Jesus modeling and teaching was not being perceived by the disciples so Jesus uses jarring words and extreme metaphors to get both their and our attention. Jesus urges us to renounce anything in our behavior that prevents others from following God, to renounce anything that limits our hospitality, to cut out of our life anything that keeps us from stepping closer to others in loving community. The graphic directives to cut off a hand, to gouged out an eye, to cut off a foot, are not meant to be taken literally rather to get our attention and illustrate the necessity of ridding ourselves of the things in our lives that keep us from wholehearted devotion to God and loving hospitality for everyone. Jesus is exposing our excuses for failing to do what is right, our rationalization that we are serving enough. Jesus is pointing out how our desire for greatness, to be in control, to elevate ourselves above others must be cut off. At first it is going to hurt, perhaps like losing a limb, however we will be set free and enjoy abundant life, peace and renewing fellowship with all people. Jesus graphic words sharply contrast being in hell, that is suffering the pain of being excluded from loving community, with heaven that is rejoicing in being a beloved cherished member of God's family.

Above the doorway of a church in London there is a prayer that has been carved into the stone: O God, make the door of this house wide enough to receive all who need human love and fellowship; narrow enough to shut out all envy, pride and strife. Make its threshold smooth enough to be no stumbling-block to children, nor to straying feet, but rugged and strong enough to turn back the tempter's power. God make the door of this house the gateway to thine eternal kingdom."

When we strip away our selfishness, jealousy and desire for greatness we see that John's complaint is absurd. It is like firefighters being upset that someone else rescued a child from a burning house. Like a pastor upset that a confirmation mentor helped their confirmand experience God. Like one church being upset that another church is full of worshippers. Like one mission group being upset that another group provided the needs to a hungry, hurting town. Instead of being upset we should be inspired to greater and greater service, bolder and bolder hospitality.

Jesus is not about keeping people out or in place or establishing a hierarchy. Jesus is about radical hospitality that overrides all the categories of the world.

A well-meaning student, striving to be politically correct went to a facility for the developmentally challenged. She asked the director. What do you call your patients or is clients the right word? The director replied we call them by name. Pastor Patrick Wilson says “That’s the way it is with the kingdom of God. Though the world labels, categorizes and separates people, in the gracious hospitality of the Kingdom, God calls them and us by name. The distinction is important, Mark says, as important as the distinction between heaven and hell, life and death, salvation and damnation. That important.”

Fred Craddock said, “The final work of grace is to make us gracious.” Christian hospitality is receiving another person as the gift of God to us.

Jesus said, whoever welcomes a child welcomes me. Regarding those from outside our group, Jesus said, do not hinder them whoever is not against us is for us. Whoever gives a cup of water will be no means lose their reward. Jesus warned us about putting stumbling blocks before others, warned us how we can be a stumbling block to ourselves. We are to be salt, flavorful with God’s love. In the time of the disciples, salt was the symbol for hospitality. We are to be at peace with all people. Jesus came preaching, teaching and revealing our hospitable God who desires to gather all people into one loving family where all enjoy abundant life.

Pastor King Oehmig writes, “As Jesus followers we must allow all concerns about our own greatness to fall away—and learn to accept those who might take different approaches or express their faith alternatively. Jesus says that if we lose this sharpness and fall instead into the trap of seeing the faith as our personal possession, right, or privilege then we too will be lost. If we truly follow Jesus we will rise above petty sin-filled concerns about who is the most important, or effective, or with it and focus our attention, as Jesus did, on struggling souls who are the least among us.”

Person by person, soul by soul, through acts of service, words of welcome and radically hospitality we draw the world closer and closer together, shoulder to shoulder, and we experience more and more of God through each other.

A church in Colorado believes in creating common ground through common good. The members have committed to each other to reduce their Christmas spending in order to give generously to Charity Water, a nonreligious, nonprofit that drills wells in Africa. This enables them to invite their non-believing friends and coworkers to partner with them in giving or to ask them to give to Charity Water instead of buying them a gift. The church’s giving is based on a sense of God’s call. Nonbelievers give for humanitarian reasons. Members enjoy celebrating their accomplishment with people outside their church. They are building friendships and community. They realize that through serving and nurturing relationships they are blessed and they are drawing people closer to God.

At little West Park Presbyterian Church in New York City they have extended hospitality by partnering with forty gourmet restaurants to prepare and deliver meals to

homebound people suffering from AIDS. They call the ministry, “God’s love: We deliver.”

Here at North Presbyterian we partner with Remember Niger to educate children in Africa. One of the strengths of Remember Niger is that they truly partner with the people of Niger. We see ourselves as equals with them. We share some of our abundant financial resources. They share contagious joy, delight in learning, abundant thanksgiving for simple, modest living, and an inspiring sense of togetherness. The people of Niger are warm, friendly, and quick to welcome us. I have never heard Kara say we are going to minister to the people of Niger. She always says we are going to minister with them, as equal friends, a partnership. Everyone who has served in Niger comes back beaming from their service to us. Together we are stepping toward each other and seeing new facets of God. Amen