

Recovering the Kingdom

Mark 9.30-37

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When I served in the jail, I worked with many people who were actively engaged in recovery from one or more addictions. Throughout the course of my time at the jail, as I learned about recovery and was entrusted with numerous personal stories, I came to believe that recovery is not just for so called “addicts.” I now believe that all of us, to one degree or another, are in need of recovery – recovery of ourselves, a self that was often lost in childhood. I also came to believe that if we loved, truly loved our children, our own children and our collective children, today's social ills would be eradicated.

Recovery is a journey which often lasts a lifetime, and which has an outcome or outcomes that are difficult to imagine when the journey begins. But if the journey has any integrity, it will cause the actor to see and think about her or himself differently and bit by bit engage the world in a healthier way.

In today's Gospel reading Jesus is taking his disciples on a journey – it is a journey to his cross. He is clear about where they are headed when they take off on the journey. He tells them, “I am going to be betrayed and killed.” (This isn't the first time he's told them.) Though they hear his words, they cannot comprehend what he is saying, it is difficult for them to imagine how this journey will end. Not only do they not understand where Jesus is leading them; they are headed full speed in the opposite direction. Their obliviousness to Jesus' intentions is evident by the argument that ensues while they are walking – an argument about whom among them is the greatest. At a rest-stop in Capernum, with the aid of a child, Jesus begins to unmask the disciples' aspirations to a form of power that is antithetical to the Kingdom of God. With this child, he turns the whole concept of kingdom, power, and greatness on its head and invites the disciples to join him on his journey, a journey in the of recovery of God's Kingdom.

I dislike the term “kingdom” for describing the wholeness of creation living within the unity of God. Kingdoms, as they have existed throughout history, are by-in-large patriarchal, hierarchies, which benefit a select few through the militarized and legalized oppression of the masses. This is the opposite of the realm of God of which Jesus spoke, within which he lived, and for which he died and was raised. But, it is what we know. And, as I said last week, language defines and describes our reality. There is no word to describe what the realm of God is because we do yet know it in its fullness. So, Jesus uses what we do know and then he turns it upside down.

The disciples are well aware of how kingdoms function. They are products of living within an Empire (another word for Kingdom). And they are intoxicated with the possibility of moving up the hierarchy, of gaining more power. Jesus doesn’t discourage their desire to be recognized and treated as special. He understands that Israelites, second-class citizens in the Roman Empire, they have been denied their full integrity and they desire to be seen and heard and respected. But, Jesus refines their understanding of what greatness within the realm of God looks like. In God’s realm there is no greatness or dignity or integrity in occupying a seat of power which entitles one to be served. In God’s realm greatness, dignity and integrity are received through servanthood, by occupying the space of serving others in a way which offers dignity and integrity to others.

Often times we read this text and understand the child to be a prop, a metaphor for marginalized people generally. This is in itself illuminating. Why don’t we see the child as a full person, representing her own class of marginalized people? We don’t minimize the other characters in scripture as prop. And we don’t generalize them as representative of all exploited or marginalized people. So why would we do this with the child? I will let you ponder that. And I’ll offer one, of many possible reasons.

We have romanticized childhood as a time of uninhibited magic, mystery and wonder. While there is indeed magic, mystery and wonder in childhood, there is also immense pain, suffering, and confusion.

Children are possibly the most vulnerable class in our society. While they have rights, it is exceptionally difficult to defend or enforce these rights, especially against domestic abuse, dysfunction, parental incompetence, and predators of all types. Children are often ignored and their needs are as well. If you disagree, then I ask you to consider this:

- Parenthood is understood to be bad a career move.
- Maternity and Paternity leave are optional benefits.
- Day care workers are in high demand but often poorly paid.
- Educational funding is not evenly distributed among all school districts.
- Even in wealthier districts teachers see their budgets reduced each year.
- We continue to debate rather than act on protecting our children from gun violence in school.
- Migrant children are treated like animals and criminals, locked in cages with shackles on their small bodies.
- Native children have the highest suicide rate in the country.
- LGBTQ children have the next highest suicide rate.
- African-American boys are more often than not classified as learning disabled.
- African-American girls are suspended and expelled more often than any of their peers.
- African-American and Native-American children are incarcerated at exponential rates and more often subjected to adult courts and adult sentences, including lifetime sentences.
- 1 in 5 girls and 1 in 20 boys, regardless of race or class, are sexually abused during their adolescence.¹
- And the church underpays and undervalues youth pastors.

¹ <http://victimsofcrime.org/media/reporting-on-child-sexual-abuse/child-sexual-abuse-statistics>

As you might expect, the conditions for children were notably worse during Jesus' lifetime. Society, including families, were stratified according to gender, class, and age. There were masters and there were servants. The masters, men, husbands and fathers, had power, while the servants, women, wives and children were expected to be obedient to those in power. Slaves, for those who could afford them, were at the very bottom of this hierarchy of power, closely followed by children. Children were viewed as socially inferior and largely invisible. And those who were not born into the ruling class were endangered. It was not uncommon for a family in economic crisis to literally dispose of an infant. It was not uncommon for a peasant or slave child to be forced into adult labor as soon as they could walk. And it was socially permissible for men in positions of great power to sexually abuse children.

As I said earlier, through my work in the jail, I have come to believe that the social ills plaguing our society could be eradicated through the radical and indiscriminate love of all children. If we want our world to be filled with and led by healthy adults, then we need to be raising up healthy children. In order to do this, we need a complete reassessment of our values and priorities and an overhaul of our systems and institutions. A new social order, one in which peace and justice prevail, cannot be constructed unless and until we have eradicated violence, exploitation and oppression.

Holding this child in his arms, welcoming her into community, Jesus turns the concept of kingdom and power upside down. Rather than discount her he honors her. Seated on his lap, he has used his power to save her from the threats, vulnerability, and violence of the Empire and bring her to safety and positive visibility at the center of God's Kingdom. This image, this action, and his words are challenge and instruction to the twelve men who are journeying with him and all of us who will. We are called to treat children as our honored, esteemed guests, welcoming them into our homes, hearts, and communities.

A number of months ago I was privileged to help host a special guest - Dr Allan Boesak, of South Africa. He was and continues to be a major figure in the non-violent, anti-apartheid movement. While Dr Boesak was visiting Madison my colleague and I made sure he was well taken care of. We provided him with comfortable lodging, plenty of good food, and a special night on the town. We took care of his transportation, driving him wherever he needed to go as he needed. We made sure he had down time, time to rest and relax, and time to play. We arranged for an audience with whom he could share his wisdom, his dreams, his frustrations, his story. We made sure he was profoundly cared for while he was with us and it was our great honor to do so. I was proud to welcome Dr Boesak, to be his host.

To welcome a person into our homes and our communities involves making them comfortable, prioritizing their needs, providing them the very best we have, and ensuring their safety. As Jesus holds this child and speaks to the disciples he is instructing them to prioritize the full welcoming of children, to understand this to be a vital part, a foundational part of their ministry. And he is challenging their understanding of Kingdom which places children at the very bottom, rather than at the center. And he is challenging their concept of power which is incongruent with, offensive to the power of the cross and the realm of God. And he is inviting them to use their power, the power inherent to them as adults, as men, as children of God, to create a new kingdom founded in radical and indiscriminate love.

And he doesn't ask them to do this alone. He promises to walk this journey with them. A journey which will end and begin again with his own act of radical and indiscriminate love. A journey which will culminate in the recovery of God's realm.

- A realm where children are placed first and given the center seat.
- A realm where children are safe, protected, loved.
- A realm where children are fed, healed, and taught.
- A realm where children are honored as offspring of the divine.

- A realm where children are honored.
- A realm in which honored, fed, healed, taught, protected, safe, and prioritized children grow up into adults who are able to freely and indiscriminately love others.

The journey to the new realm is an iterative and life-long process of repeatedly committing to carrying our crosses and to sharing the privilege of carrying **THE** cross. Like all journeys, when we begin it is impossible to imagine where or how the journey will end. But if the journey is one of faithful integrity, one which keeps us coming back to **THE** cross and our cross, then we can be confident that while on the journey we will begin to see and think about ourselves and our world differently.

- Step by step we will develop a restored understanding of the Kingdom of God.
- Step by step we will develop a restored understanding of power.
- Step by step we will develop a restored understanding of greatness.
- Step by step we will claim the cross as the truest concept of Kingdom, power, and greatness.
- Step by step we will come to realize that humanity has distorted these concepts.
- Step by step we will realize that what we take as normal is an inversion of God's truth.
- Step by step we will experience our own salvation and recovery as we use our power to participate in the salvation and recovery of others through the recovery of God's kingdom.

Blessings on your journey. May it be filled with many steps.

Amen.

Opening Prayer:

Gracious God, how shall we do your will today?
Will it be in acts of praise, in gifts shared, in prayers lifted?
Who will you lead us to serve?
Help us trust you.
Help us listen.
Bless this community
As we come together in worship.
Encourage us, comfort us, unite us,
make your joy in you complete.

Let the people of God say "Amen." **Amen.**

Prayer Before the Sermon:

Speak to us Lord, through these scriptures.
Remind us again of your everlasting power.
May we know your story and our place within it.
May we remember your mighty works and deeds, that we might know that you are the God of all ages.
May we claim your promise and share your radical and indiscriminate love.
We are listening, Lord; speak to us today.
Amen.

Blessing after the Meal:

May the body and blood of our Jesus Christ,
our teacher, lord and savior,
fill you with true power
and free you to share your greatness, through service, with God's world.