

Wesley United Methodist Church Rev. Beverly E Stenmark
September 23, 2018
Title: On the Mend: Healing Pride
Scripture: James 3:13-4:3, 7-8a
Mark 9:30-37

My grandson was about 3 ½ when he watched a political debate with his mother. As he sat there, he made observations like only a child can. He said, “Mommy, he’s not using his listening ears.” “Mommy, he’s not being nice.”

Just because we grow up, doesn’t necessarily mean that we act the way we would like to think grownups should behave. In today’s gospel reading, Jesus questioned his disciples about an argument he saw them having while they were walking along the road. They were embarrassed and didn’t want to answer him because they had been arguing with one another about who was the greatest. That wasn’t exactly something they wanted to admit to Jesus.

We might expect children to argue over who is getting more ice cream or more attention. Children tend to keep score so it’s somewhat surprising and ironic that when the disciples are locked in a power struggle and are behaving like children, Jesus reveals that he knows what they were arguing about by placing a child in their midst as an object lesson. He might have said to them, “Look at you, you are acting like children” and they might have gotten the message.

We live in a culture where the competitive spirit is honored. We are encouraged to try to be better than others – to be the best, to be number one. We are encouraged to work harder than anyone else, to get ahead. Unfortunately, the pride of being number one can come at the cost of trampling others.

In Jesus' object lesson, he turns the definition of being "first" upside down. With the child in the midst of them, he said, "Whoever welcomes a child in my name, welcomes me." This is one place where it can be helpful to understand a little bit about Jesus' culture and how it was different than ours.

When we see a baby, we gather around and "ooh" and "aah". Parents and grandparents always have a story to tell about the cute thing that their child or grandchild said or did. Notice that I did that in my opening comments. We are often willing to rearrange our schedules so that we can spend time with grandchildren or help out whenever needed. Part of my summer vacation included time spent alone with a grandchild doing special things together.

So, when Jesus says, "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name, welcomes me" we may get a warm fuzzy feeling. We love children and we are generally eager to welcome them in our midst.

But our culture is different than Jesus' culture was when it comes to children. In Jesus' day, children symbolized powerlessness and vulnerability. Children were not highly prized, they were more like "non-persons".

Prior to this section of Mark's Gospel, Jesus has healed the daughter of a woman who was an outsider. He has healed a son who was also an outsider and who was deaf and mute. Jesus has been radically aligning his kingdom with the least and the last, rather than with the most and the first. Now, Jesus places another non-person, a child, in their midst and to those who have been arguing about who is the greatest, he says that welcoming a powerless, vulnerable child is like welcoming him.

So, to people who were arguing about which one of them was the greatest, he says that being great in the eyes of the world is not what matters; what really counts is welcoming the ones who the world does not consider to be great.

He takes it one step further. Whoever welcomes a child welcomes him, and not only him, but the one who sent him – whoever welcomes a vulnerable, powerless non-person welcomes God.

The vulnerable and powerless are of more importance to Jesus than those who are considered powerful by the world. Jesus tells them, “Whoever wants to be first must be last and servant of all.” This is one more example of Jesus turning things upside down.

I struggled with writing the sermon this week. I told myself that it had a lot to do with the schedule of the week. It was important to me to have the sermon finished before yesterday’s memorial service for our brother Bruce. Part of the reason was that I knew I would be tired physically and emotionally and I didn’t want to have to go back home and write. Part of it was that I have never liked writing a sermon on Saturday night and try to avoid that.

My good intentions aside, it didn’t happen. Yesterday I had a few scattered paragraphs written but nothing substantial. Then I realized that I was trying to talk about the dangers of pride, the way we can we can be controlled by our desire to be best, to be first. I started looking for illustrations of people in power, who are servants, and suddenly realized that this whole week has been an illustration of exactly that.

During this week, over and over again, I have seen examples of people not trying to be number one, not trying to be better than someone else, but exactly the opposite. When I arrived at the funeral home Friday

just before 4 pm – just before calling hours were supposed to start – the parking lot was overflowing. The line to pay respects to Bruce, to speak with his family went on non-stop for the entire three hours.

Why? Because we were there to celebrate the life of someone who showed us by example that truly being great was not about status or power as the world measures it, but that being great is really about being a servant, helping others whenever we can. Over and over again, I heard people talking about things Bruce did but that he never looked for, nor wanted attention for what he did.

But it only started there. All week, people were working together to plan for a celebration of Bruce's life. Everyone had a part and every part was important, and no body seemed to think or proclaim that their part was more important than someone else's. There was no trying to be best, trying to be more important. It was all about serving. It was all about working together.

The number of people who prepared wonderful food for sharing was incredible. Laurie the director of our nursery school, Kristen our administrative assistant, Sue our custodian all volunteered to be in the kitchen so that whoever wanted to be at the graveside could be and so that people from the church would be free to interact with others. Irene coordinated the collation keeping track of who was bringing what and who was doing what. The number of different people who were in the kitchen at one point or another was amazing. Everyone seemed to be looking around to see what needed to be done and then simply doing it.

Members of the fire department came to set up tables and came back after everything was done to put the tables and chairs away. Firefighters served as honor guard at the calling hours, at the service, at the graveside.

Jim and I had primary responsibility for the worship service, while working with Bruce's family to be sure that we were providing worship that was hopefully meaningful and helpful for them. People were providing transportation for others. Austin and Mason were greeting people, being ushers, setting up extra chairs. Cornelia had come on Friday to put fall plants outside. Marty came earlier in the week and cleaned finger prints off the glass in the doors of the sanctuary and spruced things up as best he could. Others – many, many others – were helping out in whatever ways they could.

There is a danger in mentioning some of the things that people did, because it is impossible to mention everything and everyone. It also contradicts what I am saying about doing things without seeking attention or praise. That's not why I mentioned these examples. I mention them only to illustrate how everyone was working together. There was no ego involved, no trying to be better than someone else. Everywhere I looked, people were looking to see how they could help.

It was a tribute not only to the way that Bruce lived his life – always helping, never seeking attention – but it was also a powerful example of how we were being the body of Christ together, how we were being servants united by love. Of course, one of the slight dangers here, is that we can pat ourselves on the back to the point where our pride takes over.

What Jesus is speaking about here, is something that more and more leadership gurus are saying, Leadership, when done well, is really a collaborative activity. It is about calling forth the best in everyone, celebrating the gifts that each person brings to a team. It is about accomplishing a project by working together, not about making yourself appear great.

In the letter from James, he puts humility and wisdom together. He reminds us that the more we really and honestly examine our own lives, the humbler we actually become. He urges us to examine the deeper source of our disagreements and the underlying assumptions of our desires. He holds out the possibility that even our disagreements can become places of growth and wisdom, if we are willing to be honest with our selves and be honest about ourselves.

In conflict, or disagreement, we are invited to ask ourselves, what we are really fighting about. Are we fighting for our own desires? Are we fighting to have our own way, to gain admiration, to get even, to fulfill our pride? We are invited to ask what personal preference we are trying to protect or trying to get others to agree to. Are we trying to put ourselves first?

James reminds us that we have to continually choose whether to live by the wisdom and assumptions of the world or by the wisdom of God. The world's wisdom shows itself in selfish ambitions. God's wisdom, on the other hand, is pure and peaceable. God's wisdom shows itself as gentleness and in a willingness to yield. God's wisdom is full of mercy and good fruits.

One of the commentators I read, pointed out that pride is the flip side of grace. To be Jesus' followers, we must not think and act as the world does. In God's eyes, greatness comes through service, not through seeking recognition.

We welcome God, when we welcome those who are most vulnerable; when we include those without power as the world measures power. Jesus tells us that we become the greatest not by seeking recognition or being served, but by choosing to humble ourselves to serve others.

Let us pray.

Almighty God, give us the courage to refrain from seeking to be above others. Remind us that you do not call the best; you call those willing to be servants. Amen.ⁱ

ⁱ Upper Room Disciplines, 2018, Sunday, September 23, p.316.