

**Mark 9:30-37**

*Jesus and his disciples passed through Galilee. He did not want anyone to know it; for he was teaching his disciples, saying to them, "The Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him, and three days after being killed, he will rise again." But they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him.*

*Then they came to Capernaum; and when he was in the house he asked them, "What were you arguing about on the way?" But they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another who was the greatest. He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all." Then he took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms, he said to them, "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me."*

"What were you **arguing** about on the way?" But the disciples were silent, for on the way they had **argued** with one another who was the **greatest**. Perhaps they were **silent**, because maybe they didn't want Jesus to know what they were arguing about, how they were stacking each other up against the other, ranking – which of us is the smartest, the strongest – his **favorite**? Why do we **do** that? –jockeying, comparing, ranking,?

I will forever remember the day, several years ago now, when our then 7<sup>th</sup> grade son came home with a note a classmate had shared with him. It was a two-sided single piece of paper. Lists. Lists of names. Anonymously ranking from one to 40 (the number of kids in his grade) every single kid in different categories, by order of popularity, athletic ability, physical beauty, intelligence, you name it – a ranking, from first to last.

It was devastating on every level – cruel, and soul-crushing. The school dealt with it. We – the parents dealt with it. The kids **themselves** dealt with it within their community. It took a lot of careful, courageous, restorative conversations and – compassion (emotional space where the kids could honestly name their hurt, and their remorse). We **all** dealt with it – but you just can't unsee a list, erase that kind of shame.

The first moment I saw it –I remember feeling just **sick**, and **appalled** - and asking 'Who does this?! How/where did these kids learn how to DO this?' But we all know that this kind of cultural toxicity, jockeying and vying for resources and prestige, making judgements, based on rankings exists in every single area of our lives. Upon reflection, I realized, 'Of course, these kids were mirroring what they see in us.

But Jesus is teaches us that this does not have to be so!

I discovered a stunning story this week about Saint Thérèse of Lisieux – 19<sup>th</sup> century French mystic, also known popularly as the "Little Flower". When Thérèse was just four years old, she was presented with a handful of silk ribbons, one of every color of the rainbow, and she was asked to **choose one**. Captivated, entranced, she considered carefully, and simply responded, "I choose **all**."

I choose **all**.

This wasn't the choice of a greedy, demanding selfish child – "I want it all, and I want it now!". But neither was her response just sweet. There's nothing sappy or sentimental about it. No, hers was a deeply profound **insight** and **decision**. "I choose **all**. I see them **all**. And I love them all in their depth and hue and rich variety. And so I choose **ALL**."

I choose all!

Very young children do this, before they are ever taught pecking orders and social hierarchies, before they internalize the very narrow gender roles and expectations our culture imposes, before they take on the constructs of race we burden them with, before they learn to body shame, and judge and rank one another – They simply choose **all**. ALL things, all people, all possibilities. **And very young children** know who they are – with a deep wisdom - and they are quite comfortable with who they are, uninhibited, unabashed – Completely comfortable expressing their emotions – voicing their needs – saying no – so comfortable asking **questions**, and **answering** the questions we ask them. *That's why we can believe what children are saying to us.*

And the very young child has no need to be named the favorite or the best or the brightest or the greatest. Because they trust what is inherit in every human being – that they are already so good. **So good!** And they trust that the **world** is so good! **So good!** That's before We teach them otherwise, teach them shame, and mistrust, and self-loathing.

Jesus asks his disciples - "What were you arguing about on the way?" But they were silent, for they had **argued** with **one another** who was the **greatest**. To this Jesus responds, he's going to show them that it doesn't have to be so. He sits down, and calls the twelve to him, and says to them, "Whoever wants to be **first** must be **last** of all and servant of **all**."

**Ah! he's** reversing the world's ideas of "greatness" in God's kingdom. He's flipping the order, messing with the list, erasing the rankings.

**But then Jesus takes it a step further.**

The Scripture says, "Then he took a little **child** and put it among them." We can't fully understand and appreciate what he's doing here unless we understand that in Jesus time and culture children had no rights – no status – they weren't even considered fully human – not until they reached adulthood – Maybe the best way to describe them is to say that the children were **culturally invisible**.

So when Jesus says – whoever wants to be first must be LAST, and takes a CHILD and puts it among them, he's not saying something sappy and sentimental. He's saying something radical: -

He's saying – "I want you to **SEEK** out the ones who are culturally invisible, the power-less, the ones who are left out, the last ones on the list – the most vulnerable. And **Welcome** them.

"Whoever welcomes one such **child** in my name welcomes **me**, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me."

We can also miss the deepest thread of meaning in this story unless we understand the meaning of the Greek word for **welcome** used here, –*dechomai*

This word means:

to take (the one who is invisible/powerless) **by the hand**,

and don't let go,

to **receive** into one's family,

to give ear to (listen deeply and really seek to understand),

to **embrace**,

and more than that – to **approve of**, and to **accept** as one's very **own**.

So Jesus is instructing us here – "really **welcome** (take by the hand, into your family, as your own) the most vulnerable among you, the rejected, the scandalous, the runaways and throwaways, the refugees and outcasts, the oppressed and the forgotten! – All THAT in the word 'welcome.'

That's what we're doing when we're advocating for something that feels risky but just,

That's what we're doing when we march in Pride parades,

or learning everything we can about something we don't yet understand,

or just being with, standing with someone who is otherwise invisible and alone –

not to secure our place as the greatest, but because in doing so we are taking that list, erasing it, rewriting it, and better yet, just tearing it up, and throwing the list away! to **welcome** anyone of us – any part of us – that is judged and ridiculed and ranked.

"Then he took a little **child** and put it among them; and taking it in **his** own arms, he said to them, "Whoever **welcomes one** such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me."

This isn't just a sweet story, ya'll, so I've got to believe Jesus is asking us to do something radical, and remarkable and restorative here:

So when asked, say, **I choose all!**

If we must choose– we will place the most vulnerable, the **least**, first, and the **first**, last.

But we choose ALL - with all our fluidity and beauty, messiness and imperfection, all our magnificent depth and difference, in all our hues and rich variety. We do not – **will** not - place one's needs or value or worth over any other.

We choose ALL! Amen.