

And the Last Shall Be First
by Rev. Sharon Lee MacArthur
For Berkeley Chinese Community Church
September 23, 2018 • 18th Sunday after Pentecost • 11 am

Mark 9:30-37

³⁰They went on from there and passed through Galilee. He did not want anyone to know it; ³¹for 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.' ³²But they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him.

³³Then they came to Capernaum; and when he was in the house he asked them, 'What were you arguing about on the way?' ³⁴But they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another about who was the greatest. ³⁵He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, 'Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.' ³⁶Then he took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms, he said to them, ³⁷'Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.'



Last week was pretty special - our Cantonese worshipping community joined us at the beginning of worship as well as the Sunday School kids. We saw a video of an 11 year old Jonathan sang with the choir at the Christmas Service Service in a voice that had not yet changed. And then swelled with pride when this very same Jonathan now a young man going off to UC Santa Barbara sang for us live and thanked his church family for teaching him and supporting him throughout his life.



Then as ONE church, we laid hands on him and Connor and we blessed them as they took their next steps on their life journey. Being part of this special milestone moment, we realized 18 years had flashed by and we are reminded us that this is what being church is about...to be the church family to help parents provide their children with roots and wings as they leave the nest to be God's child in the world.

And along the way – we adults learned a few things, too! Did anyone even guess that all the while we and he thought we were teaching him as he grew, Jonathan was teaching us? We were learning that sometimes lessons are beyond books and Sunday school lessons, lectures and workshops. Life lessons are learned through sharing life experiences, through observing

behaviors and attitudes when one is faced with crises and hardships as well as joys and celebrations. I did say learn together – student AND teacher - because oftentimes teachers and leaders learn lessons from the younger generation...



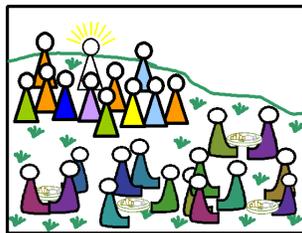
Mrs. Imogene Frost did. Mrs. Frost teaches Sunday School in New Jersey. One day, she heard her kids grumbling about life as a kid. So she asked her Sunday School kids "What's wrong with grownups?"

She was enlightened by the answers...

1. Grownups never really listen to what children have to say. They always decide ahead of time what they're going to answer.
2. Grownups interrupt children all the time and think nothing of it. If a child interrupts a grownup, he gets a scolding or something worse.
3. Sometimes grownups punish children unfairly. It isn't right if you've done just some little thing wrong and grownups take away something that means an awful lot to you.

From that sampling, we get the idea that the Sunday School students in Mrs. Frost's class felt that life was unfair – that they didn't count for much and a child's life was tough.

I remember some of the tough times - I was a child once....I remember in the third grade I dreaded PE...especially those days when we had to split up into teams – I didn't get the hang of sports until I was in high school. I was pretty uncoordinated in elementary school and I was always one of the last ones chosen to be on any team. It was a terrible feeling to be the last one picked! It was no fun being a kid!



Well – back in Bible Times – life was probably even worse for kids – they didn't count for much - they weren't counted literally! Remember the story of the fishes and loaves? People often remember it as the "feeding of the 5,000". Most commentaries on this passage talk about how it was really the feeding of the **15,000 or 20,000** because women and children weren't counted in the "official" number!



So, we know something is up when Jesus

- sits down,
- calls the twelve,
- and says to them, "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all."
- Then takes a little child and places the child front and center among them and says ,
"Whoever welcomes a child like this in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me."



Remember: this is on the heels of their arguing among themselves about who is the greatest!

Well – their heads must be reeling! What are you talking about? Welcoming a lowly child is welcoming God?

As Kathryn Matthews Huey reflects – “Those poor disciples are experiencing one more boat-rocking paradox, one more radical up-ending of the way **they** think things ought to be, and **hope** they will be, when Jesus comes into **their** idea of glory.

“He's already told them that if they want to gain their life, they should lose it (8:35).

“Now, when they want to find their way to the top, to claim greatness, he's telling them to be content being in the last and lowest place.”

Welcome a child!!????

This latest command makes no sense at all in the world of the disciples. What?

- Welcome someone who doesn't have the power or ability or place to welcome us in return!?!?
- No expectation of reciprocity!?!? (or in other words, no return on our investment)
- First, our Teacher/Messiah keeps talking about suffering and dying instead of victory and glory, and now we have to welcome and even value small, insignificant, powerless people!?!?

Children in the culture that shaped the disciples' worldview weren't the only ones who were devalued; they shared space on the margins with many others in their society who were both powerless and vulnerable.

There's a huge list of such people who didn't "count": people "who were old, who were handicapped, sick, illiterate, cast out as unclean. This group included peasants, farmers, shepherds, widows, slaves, the unemployed, aliens, immigrants, prisoners, homeless."

How many of those people still don't count in our own society?

The image of a child can conjure up images of all these people who don't count....a child who might not even be aware of what's going on – a child whose value was in his or her potential, that is, if they even survived to adulthood, and the odds were not good. At this point in their lives, however, they're more like servants. In fact, did you know that the Greek words for "child" and "servant" have the same root?



It seems to me that when Jesus took the child in his arms, He was saying...the greatest leader is the one who places the child and all who the child symbolizes at the top of their priorities – at the center of life and living! Remember – this incident happened immediately after the disciples were arguing about who is the greatest!



You know those organizational charts to show the chain of command - of who has power over whom? A flowchart of power. Well – Jesus would take that chart and reverse it – upend it, make it flow “upside down”. Jesus would put children at the top...the lowest at the top, and the high and mighty brought low, with the first being last, and the last first.



I'm reminded of something I witnessed in my son Gavin's elementary class – I had volunteered to be a chaperone for a field trip and was in the classroom when the kids were asked to line up so they can get on the school bus waiting at the curb.



The students who were very quick on the feet ran to the door and were *once again* first in line – lots of “victory cheers” – and they had been trained well – at least there was no pushing and shoving. You couldn’t help but notice the slower kids and their resignation to their usual end of the line positions.

When all was quiet and the teacher decided everyone was ready – she asked them all to turn 180 degrees and to begin marching forward - in a giant u-turn and then out the door to the bus – the last had become first and the first, last. There was stunned silence and then the victory cheers came from the formerly quiet mouths and the “awwwws” from the former “victors”. Jesus would have been pleased!

So what have we learned?

Maybe to Jesus/God...ALL people count.... no matter who you are or where you are on life’s journey - you count!



Some years ago St. Paul School of Theology in Kansas City was seeking a new president. Over one hundred candidates applied for the position. The search committee narrowed the list to five very qualified persons.



Then somebody came up with a brilliant idea:



let’s send a person to the institutions where each of the five finalists is currently employed and interview the janitor at each place, asking him what he thinks of the candidate being considered.

That's just what they did and one janitor gave such a glowing appraisal of that candidate that he was selected President of St. Paul's School of Theology. (William MacElvaney, Pres/St. Paul's 1973-85)

Somebody on that search committee understood that those who live close to Christ would be so secure in his love that they no longer relate to other people according to rank or power or money or prestige. That close-to-Christ person would treat janitors and governors with equal dignity. They would regard **everybody** as a VIP.



It would seem that most children seem to do this intuitively and some of us adult Christians may have to relearn it and practice it.

Here at BCCC we DO value our children and youth – they do count - they take part in all aspects of church life; their opinions and thoughts matter!

And folks, we are committed to following Jesus' footsteps - committed to following his teachings! So how **do** we show the kind of respect we have for our children and youth and for those who society discounts? how **do** we make sure that they ALSO count?



ALAMEDA COUNTY
**COMMUNITY
FOOD BANK**



YEAH!

Our Juliets have adopted the Day Shelter for homeless women in our neighborhood. Our whole church participates in Food Drives for the Alameda Food Bank. We participate annually in the Crop Walk for Hunger. Our kids support the homeless Youth program in Berkeley. Is there more we can do?

How about asking Jesus to guide our votes at elections – the officials we elect....the decisions that we make on new laws and propositionsWill they help to take care of those in need of care and acceptance by society? Will they help to feed the hungry? If so – that's who and what we vote for.

How can we provide voice for those without voice? How can we make **that** voice important to our representatives and lawmakers.

How can we find ways to support our colleagues who are working on their behalf – the homeless, the immigrants, the handicapped, the hungry, the children in our communities and the world who are not valued....

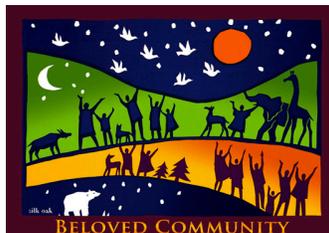
Those are just some of the things we can do **AND we can pray.....**



I am reminded of a time when I went with my husband Nowell to a potluck meeting of a group he's a part of at his church – St. Joseph's in Pinole. This group visits young people in juvenile hall in Martinez. It was inspiring to hear the experiences of these parishioners - some of whom have been participating in this ministry for 17 years – from the time the program began. We heard from the coordinator – Rev. Tinsley who serves a Presbyterian Church in Vallejo part time and is a chaplain at this juvenile hall. His encouraging comments led all of us to believe that even if a youth says nothing and seems disinterested, these visits have an impact. He has seen the results of these faithful visits – they are seeds that are planted that sometimes take a decade to bloom. Rev. Tinsley shared that in the previous year – he attended the college graduations of a number of juvenile hall alums...One in Ohio and another in Oregon. Prayers help and planting those seeds years ago helped to save the lives of these youngsters so that they can give back to their communities – both have decided to work with at-risk and high-risk youth in urban settings!



Friends - we have been planting seeds in our BCCC children...we've been helping children by supporting the Cantare kids...we've held workshops here to help youth with college applications. And with prayers and God's help, we hope these seeds will begin to bud and bloom...as they grow & bloom, so too may our individual and collective compassion for, love for and connection with our brothers and sisters at the margins grow and bloom that we move closer



to becoming God's Beloved Community where the last shall be the first. Amen!