

Sermon – 10/21/18
Servants of All
Isaiah 53:4-12; Mark 10:35-45
22nd Sunday after Pentecost
Davidson College Presbyterian Church – Davidson, NC
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Morgan Guyton, who currently serves as a Methodist Campus Minister at Tulane University, recently told the following story about his two sons:

He said: *“My sons [when they were small] used to break dance during church. Except that it wasn’t exactly break dancing. While the praise band played, they would experiment with spinning in the aisle, often falling over in the process. They did headstands and half-cartwheels. At other times they moved like robots. They weren’t the only kids who danced in the aisle at our contemporary worship service. Sometimes half a dozen children would be running around, crashing into, falling, rolling on the floor. At first, (said Guyton), I thought that their aisle dancing was key to our marketing of the ultimate “kid-friendly” worship service. But I never could get a good picture. Because what they were doing wasn’t photogenic. It was chaotic. Too unchoreographed.*

“And that’s what made it beautiful. It was uninhibited. Those kids felt safe moving their bodies to the music in the socially disruptive, un-stage-managed way that kids do everything. Even if they ran more than they danced, even if they weren’t singing the words on the screen correctly, they were delighting in God’s presence.

“Sometimes during the last song, they would grab my hands, so we could spin around in circles together until somebody fell over. Or they would start jumping up and down, and it would give me the courage to jump with them. They took me back to my early childhood, to a time when I wasn’t afraid to let myself go ... I remembered Jesus’ declaration in Mark 10:15 that ‘whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it’”¹

Ask yourself: *“In what sense do we need to become like children to receive the kingdom of God?”*

Obviously, there are many ways that as adults we should *not* act like children. For example, children tend to very selfish. They think they are the center of the universe, until they learn otherwise. They’re often rude because they don’t understand the social conventions that require years of patient teaching for them to learn. They have short attention spans. They have trouble sitting still long enough to enjoy the scenery. They always have to be climbing, chewing, scratching, or touching everything.

But there’s something children have that most people would give anything to get back: *the wonder and delight of a life without self-consciousness.*

Think about it: Children may be selfish; they may scream, *“MINE!”* when asked to share a toy; *but they have not started obsessing about what other people think of them.*

That is what we mean when we talk about the innocence of children.

You see, until children lose their innocence, *they live in a world without mirrors.* And a world without mirrors is a world full of God’s glory. Every new discovery is the best thing (!), whether it’s the escalator at the mall or a bridge that goes all the way across the Mississippi River. Children are genuinely wowed by the features of God’s creation that grown-ups have stopped noticing because we’re so preoccupied with our careers and agendas and platforms. Children haven’t yet learned that they’re supposed to be *striving* toward some role that society or peers or their own self-consciousness tells them they should be playing. [In adulthood, it’s sometimes called *“keeping up with the Joneses.”* And this problem has been intensified in the age of social media, in which we learn that each of us is supposed to have a *“brand”* that we need to cultivate to *“sell”* our identity to other people].

¹ Morgan Guyton, *“How Jesus Saves the World from Us,”* Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville, KY, 2016, pp. 6, 7

So, as we get older, we lose the delight and wonder of childhood. Sometimes there's a single scarring incident; sometimes it happens over time. Some children experience the tragedy of having their innocence taken away by abusive adults. Others gain self-consciousness in competitive sports when they drop the ball too often or lose too many races. However it happens, we all lose our innocence. We are all transformed from curious delightful "innocents" into anxious, self-obsessed *strivers*.²

Which is exactly what we see in our Gospel reading from Mark this morning, where James and John ask for *seats of honor* on Jesus' left and right in the age to come (10:37). But Jesus points out that he has no power to bestow such future honors in God's realm—it is, after all, *God's* realm. The other ten disciples are upset with James and John, and Jesus directs his final discipleship instruction to all twelve of them:

"You know that among the Gentiles [e.g. the Romans] those whom they recognize as their rulers Lord it over them. But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man [Humanity] came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (10:42-45).

Not only are Jesus' disciples not to replicate the power structure of the powerful in their own group by "lording it over" each other, but they are to reverse this power structure by serving those in greater need than themselves, even putting themselves at risk to do so.

This is the culmination of what Jesus has been trying to communicate about the discipleship God's realm requires and enables. The usual mode of power relations (among Gentiles, Romans, and humans!) is for the powerful to order the less powerful to serve them. But the way of participating in God's power is for persons willingly to serve those with less power and status than themselves.

And notice that those with the least power in Jesus' world—women, children, and slaves—are *not* the audience of this instruction!³

So, is there a remedy/a solution to our constant *striving* for power, attaining the places of honor, our wanting to "Lord it over" others, as our text puts it?

The late Henri Nouwen said in his book, *Life of the Beloved*, that God is constantly reaching out to us with ... love, trying to help us understand that we are ... beloved. (In other words, God loves us, not because of anything we have done, but simply because *God is love. Love is just what God does.*

Nouwen suggests that when we are *striving*, we are actually living the opposite of belovedness. But belovedness means living under the gaze of a God who watches us with such a warmth *that we stop worrying about what to do with our hands when we dance.* That warmth, if we allow ourselves to embrace it, can fill our hearts with the true, genuine experience of life that we lost when we were children. As Nouwen proclaims throughout his book, we will always feel lonely, no matter how many friends and admirers we have, until we hear and trust the inner voice of God's love in our hearts.⁴

Friends, on this Children's Sabbath, the following words of Martin Luther King, Jr., seem appropriate:

"Everybody can be great, because anybody can serve. You don't have to have a college degree to serve. You don't have to make your subject and verb agree to serve. You only need a heart full of grace. A soul generated by love."

² Ibid., p. 8

³ Elizabeth Struthers Malbon, *The Women's Bible Commentary*, (The Gospel of Mark), Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville, KY, 2012, pp. 487, 488

⁴ Henri Nouwen, *Life of the Beloved*, Crossroad, New York, 1993, pp. 26, 39

We also recall the words of St. Francis of Assisi that speak to the profound reversals of first and last, serving and being served, that Jesus calls us to:

Lord, make me a channel of your peace.

That where there is hatred, I may bring love;

That where there is wrong, I may bring the spirit of forgiveness;

That where there is discord, I may bring harmony;

That where there is error, I may bring truth;

That where there is doubt, I may bring faith;

That where there is despair, I may bring hope;

That where there are shadows, I may bring light;

That where there is sadness, I may bring joy;

Lord, grant that I may seek to comfort rather than to be comforted;

To understand than to be understood;

To love than to be loved.

For it is by forgetting self that one finds;

It is by forgiving that one is forgiven;

It is by dying that one awakens to eternal life.

Amen.