

**Sermon - 9/23/18**  
**Power Plays**  
**James 3:13-4:3; Mark 9:30-37**  
**18th Sunday after Pentecost**  
**Davidson College Presbyterian Church - Davidson, NC**  
**Scott Kenefake**

Part of my study-leave this past summer was spent at the *Chautauqua Institution* in western New York (near Jamestown). Chautauqua was originally founded in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century by Methodists as a summer, lakefront retreat center, but it quickly became a gathering place in the summer months for all of the major Christian denominations--and over time--they all have built hotels and boarding houses and cottages for their members and friends to stay in—and that includes Presbyterians.

In recent years, Chautauqua programming during the summer has become interfaith and focuses on weekly themes that feature speakers, academics, and writers, (the best and brightest) in business, government, international relations, religion, and the arts.

The week I attended the theme was “*Russia and the West*” which also happened to coincide with the Helsinki Summit between Putin and Trump. Needless, to say, the various Russia scholars on hand had much to say (that was of interest) about that!

But the worship leader for the week was also very interesting. The leader was a Jesuit Priest named *Father Greg Boyle*. Father Boyle is the founder of an organization in Los Angeles called, *Homeboy Industries*.

You see, at the conclusion of his theological studies, Boyle spent a year living and working with Christian base communities in Cochabamba, Bolivia. Upon his return in 1986, he was appointed pastor of *Dolores Mission Church*, a Jesuit parish in the Boyle Heights neighborhood of East Los Angeles that was then the poorest Catholic church in the city. At the time, the church sat between two large public housing projects and amid the territories of numerous gangs.

By 1988, in an effort to address the escalating problems and unmet needs of gang-involved youth, Boyle and parish and community members began to develop positive opportunities for them, including establishing an alternative school and a day care program, and seeking out legitimate employment, calling this initial effort *Jobs for a Future*.

Then, in the wake of the 1992 Los Angeles riots, *Jobs for a Future* and *Proyecto Pastoral*, a community-organizing project begun at the parish, launched their first social enterprise business, *Homeboy Bakery*. In the ensuing years, the success of the bakery created the groundwork for additional social enterprise businesses, leading *Jobs for a Future* to become an independent nonprofit organization, Homeboy Industries.

*Homeboy Industries* is now the largest and most successful gang rehabilitation and re-entry program in the world. Homeboy offers an “exit ramp” for those stuck in a cycle of violence and incarceration. The organization's holistic approach, with free services and programs, supports 10,000 men and women a year as they work to overcome their pasts, re-imagine their futures, and break the inter-generational cycles of gang violence. Therapeutic and educational offerings (case management, counseling, and classes), practical services (e.g., tattoo removal, work readiness, and legal assistance), and job training-focused business (e.g., Homeboy Bakery, Homegirl Café, and Homeboy Silkscreen & Embroidery) provide healing alternatives to gang life, while creating safer and healthier communities.<sup>1</sup>

I want you to think about this in terms of our Gospel reading this morning from Mark where Jesus calls his disciples to model a new kind of leadership—a servant based leadership, where the last are first, those at the bottom are the most important, much like the work Father Boyle has been doing for more than thirty years with gang members in East Los Angeles.

---

<sup>1</sup> *Father Greg Boyle*, Wikipedia

Recall that once again, Jesus' followers struggle to understand the nature of his mission and their role as leaders of his emerging movement. "Who is the greatest among us?" they argue. Caught up in worldly values, they see greatness in terms of access to power and lordship over others.

In contrast, Jesus presents his followers with a *countercultural vision* of spiritual greatness, in which the leader is servant and the easily forgotten members of society take center stage. Children, not Caesar, model what it is like to be great in God's realm—and in welcoming children, we welcome God and see the world with new eyes. Our visions of greatness will shape our spirituality, ethics, and political involvement.<sup>2</sup>

Perhaps they have been captivated by images of power embodied in the rule of Augustus and Herod. These leaders privileged a form of power that controls, that separates leader from subjects. In their ruminations, the disciples no doubt ask: *Isn't divine greatness a matter of transcendent and awe-inspiring power? Shouldn't authoritarian power be the pattern for relationships among Jesus' followers as well?*

But in contrast to his disciples' images of greatness, Jesus identifies greatness with *service* and *empathy*. Those who are *great* are willing to sacrifice for a greater good than their own self-interest. True greatness involves *humility* and the willingness to serve rather than be served. Surely this vision is at the heart of Paul's hymn to servant, self-giving leadership in Philippians 2. "*Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others.*" Having the mind of Christ inspires unity and empathy, not separation and apathy. Spiritual greatness is revealed in God's participation in the maelstrom of human suffering.<sup>3</sup>

Think of it this way: according to legend, *Francis of Assisi*, raised in wealth and privilege, felt revulsion at the sight of lepers. One day he encountered a leper on the road and experienced his usual discomfort. This time, however, he remembered that the man with leprosy was one of God's beloved children. He dismounted from his horse and gave the leper a coin and a kiss. The leper returned the favor. From then on, people with leprosy became a particular object of Francis's ministry. No longer disfigured in his eyes, they were now, in the words of *St. Teresa of Calcutta*, "*Christ in all his distressing disguises.*" Francis learned that spiritual stature involves care for the least of these. Centuries later, *Pope Francis* stopped the pope-mobile to embrace and kiss another man suffering from a disfiguring disease. The world was moved by the authentic greatness revealed in welcoming the vulnerable.

*St. Thérèse of Lisieux* saw her mission in terms of doing ordinary acts with great love. Nowhere is this domestic spirituality more evident than in our personal and corporate care for children. In Jesus' time, children were often seen as *expendable*. Yet Jesus embraces a child as a symbol of true greatness. A child—not Caesar—represents the heart of God.<sup>4</sup>

American public policy (of course) neglects millions of children at home and abroad. We privilege gun rights over safe schools. We forget Howard Thurman's observation that one of the most tragic effects of poverty is the loss of imagination among children. National leaders seem at peace with children of undocumented immigrants remaining separated from their parents; they see programs that promote children's health and welfare as optional. Tax cuts for the wealthy trump care for vulnerable children. (40% of Americans currently live in poverty [the majority of whom are children]; more than 50% of children in Mecklenburg County live in poverty).

---

<sup>2</sup> Bruce Epperly, *The Mysticism of Greatness*, The Christian Century, September 21, 2018

<sup>3</sup> Bruce Epperly, *Living by the Word*, The Christian Century, September 18, 2018

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

The concern we middle-class American parents have for our own children is apparent in the rise of child-rearing books, after-school sports, and wall-to-wall activities to help them get ahead in the world. Yet we often neglect their deepest needs—namely, meaningful cross-generational relationships nurtured over time.<sup>5</sup>

Friends, in today's passage, Jesus asserts that *greatness* involves *empathy* and *compassion*—a kind of leadership our world desperately needs in all facets of life. Greatness is embodied in caring for the most vulnerable members of our community, *first* of all by embracing them with love, hearing their stories, and responding to their cares. Our congregations do their best ministry (I think) with both children (and adults!!) when we make sure that the people of the church—and the people of the community—*know* that God loves them, that we love them, and that their lives matter and are full of possibility. In affirming them, we are awakened to theophanies—possibilities--in our encounters with them.

Amen.

---

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*