

One thing that I have found from watching the coverage of the Winter Olympics is that is always fun to cheer when your team is winning. NBC has been covering the games, and the ratings have been high. They give you a background story with pathos, people overcoming odds, and they time the coverage to cut to the most dramatic events in primetime. I wonder if it is as much fun to watch if you are from one of the countries which has a smaller group of athletes. For Americans it is fun, because we have so many competing, and because it is fun to be on the side of a winner.

In the Gospel of Mark, from which we get today's scripture reading, we find that at the halfway point in Jesus' ministry, it sounds to the disciples if they have been following a winning team. Up to the point of today's scripture, things have been going very well for Jesus. Now, all of a sudden, Jesus begins to change what he talks about, and it seems as if the coverage of the big events starts to go south. It is not so easy for the disciples to watch, to cheer for, or to get behind. As we look at the gospel today, I want us to start by looking at the easy accounts of Jesus' ministry in the Gospel of Mark. Next, I want us to think about today's scripture passage and to turn our gaze to the littlest, the least, and the lost; this part of the gospel which is not star coverage, but rather more about the cost of Jesus' ministry. Finally, I want us to look, not at the thrill of victory, but at the drudgery of servant hood, with a special focus on servant hood with children.

First, I want us to look at the triumphs in the first half of the Gospel of Mark. Jesus' ministry is on a roll. From the time of his baptism in the river Jordan by John, until this point, things are going well. If it had been televised, it would have been spectacular coverage. The account does start out a little slowly, with the calling of the fishermen Simon Peter, Andrew, James and John, but it goes uphill from there. Jesus begins with healing a man with an unclean spirit, and goes on to heal a leper. Jesus tells the man to keep quiet about the healing, but he blabs to the media. Crowds begin to gather. There are so many pushing in around him that some friends have to break through a roof and lower their paralyzed friend in order to get him close to Jesus. The multitude follows him, and why wouldn't they? He actually has to get in a boat and go out a ways to preach because the crowd is so great.

I heard an interview during the Olympic coverage with snowboarder Shaun White. His sponsors had built a secret half pipe up in the mountains for White to practice on. He was asked whether he thought he was so special that he needed this special treatment, but he said that was not the reason he practiced there. Instead, it was because he was so famous that if he tried to ski or snow board at a regular resort, there was chaos. As he went down the hill, fans would follow him, trying to take video of him on their camera phones. He said his friends would no longer snow board with him because he would be followed by the carnage of children and adults crashing behind him as they lost their footing trying to get his picture!

This was something of what it was like for Jesus and his disciples. The crowds were so insistent, the gospel tells us, that they couldn't even get a moment in which to eat. There were more healings, and Jesus even raises a little girl from the dead. He feeds the five thousand, walks on water, does more healings, feeds thousands more, and finally

appears on the top of a mountain with Moses and Elijah in the glorious moment we call the transfiguration. There were a few negative moments. For example, for the second time Jesus mentions something about his death and the fact that people will try and kill him. The disciples don't understand, and they are afraid to ask him what he means. Instead, they choose to focus on Jesus' triumph, and in today's scripture talk among themselves about which one of them will be the greatest in heaven along Jesus' side. Peter, John and James got to be present at the transfiguration. Why were they so special? Did this hurt my odds of being chosen, the disciples were thinking? Did they have the advantage? It was kind of like them not having enough practice time on the ice. Was that fair?

It was into this setting that Jesus brings the excitement and the drama of the account to a screeching halt. Here was a man who could control everything. He could heal illness, feed thousands, raise the dead, and even control the weather. Why wouldn't the disciples think they were going to get rewarded for being one of the twelve? They were with him all the way. They were his entourage. Why shouldn't they get some of the spoils?

Instead, Jesus tells them, the spoils are to go to the "littlest, the least, and the lost." This phrase is a quotation from Joyce Ann Mercer, in her book *Welcoming Children*. The disciples are focusing on the success of Jesus. "Hey disciples, you were just at the transfiguration! What are you going to do now?" Instead of answering, "We're going to Disneyworld," they hear that they are to forget glory and look instead to society's disregarded ones.

Children for us in modern America are seen as a gift, or a prize, or a joy, or a blessing. Children in the time of Jesus were seen as the lowest of the low. In spite of this, Jesus picks a child up, and says that our ministry is to be to such as this child? When Jesus has so much power and could do anything? The demand of Jesus for us to welcome such as these is ridiculous, it is radical!

In January, I took a class at the UN about the world's children. In some of our reading, we looked at the place children held in religious thought over the past 3000 years. Not every society saw children the way we do today. In his book, *Social Science in the Synoptic Gospels*, Bruce Malina tells us that the child in Bible times had a precarious future. Thirty percent of the children died at birth, and of those who lived, another 30% died by the age of five. Only 50% of those born made it to age 16. One ancient Buddhist text instructed the reader on how to mourn for a dead child. If it was a newborn, you were to limit your grief to one day, longer if the child lived longer. You only were supposed to show your full grief if the child died at eight years of age or older. I read that Thomas Aquinas gave these instructions to Christian families if there was a fire. First the husband was to save his father, secondly his mother. After that he could save his wife, and last of all, the children. These pronouncements shock us, but I don't think they made them because they were heartless and cruel. Instead, I wonder if this attitude toward children was a way of self protection, a way to avoid investing completely in the child so to avoid agony at the likelihood of their death. Barbara Brown

Taylor says that the child was seen as “filler.” They were like hungry caterpillars that you had to feed and feed, just hoping that they made it to become a butterfly someday.

Jesus could do anything. He was on top of the world. In spite of this, he focuses his ministry in a way the disciples could not have imagined. He said that to be his disciple, we should not focus on our reward, but instead focus on welcoming the littlest, the least, and the lost, those who society has turned aside, those who have nothing to give you in return. By welcoming them, you welcome Jesus, and by welcoming Jesus, you welcome God.

For children in the present day, it is still true that around the world it is often the child who suffers first and who suffers the most. When there is little food, or environmental hazards, or when there is no schooling, the littlest are the most at risk. In my sermon last week I gave you some information about the state of children around the world, and I am not going to go over again what our duty is to those in need. Instead, I want to tell you of a disturbing paradox. The students in my class gave reports on various countries, and our professor chose countries from around the world, including the poorest and the richest countries. We learned about poor countries, but we also learned about rich countries, such as Sweden, which has the highest rate of education, children’s health, and other indicators. In spite of having money to provide the best care, we found out that in Sweden there was a high instance of youth drug and alcohol use, and of teen suicide. It reminded me that in different ways, all of us are in need of the Master’s touch. What is our role to all those little ones? It is to welcome all of those who are the least easy to welcome.

How do we do this? The answer is servant hood. Jesus, who could do anything, who could have anything, chooses instead the role of the servant. He calls us, not to fame or reward, but to service. The disciples were expecting rewards for their glorious work. Instead they are called to work without glory. You have probably heard of the Roman Catholic priest Henri Nouwen. He wrote many books, and was hired to teach at Harvard later in his life. This was the height of academic achievement, and was something many people would aspire to. He was teaching in one of the best schools in the world, and influencing people who would become leaders in their communities. Nouwen felt, however, that something was missing from his life. At the height of his success, he quit his teaching position, and moved to become the chaplain at Daybreak, in Toronto, a home for the mentally retarded and special needs patients. None of them had ever heard of Henri Nouwen. He didn’t go there to increase his fame. He gave up something to work for, what by society’s standards, was less of a reward.

This week in our afterschool program It’s Elementary, we were studying the fruits of the Spirit and were focused on “kindness.” It was also a prize day for good behavior. At the end of the time in which we stressed kindness, kindness, kindness, a little boy came up to me, and told me that he had shared his prize candy with another student. I told him how “kind” that was, and he asked me if I didn’t think he deserved a second prize for being so kind. Unfortunately, I had to tell him, that is not the way it works. Our work in the world can seem endless and frustrating, but Jesus’ response to us is to humble

ourselves and to serve more. It is easy to work when you get a lot of thanks. It is much harder to keep up the work when you get none.

I get plenty of thank yous for my work here at Westminster, where much of my time is spent with children. Because of my life and training, I am also lucky to have acquired many skills. I did speech and debate in high school and college, and so I am able to preach fairly well. I did clinical pastoral education at a great hospital in Boston, and so I am able to do pastoral care. I had a good seminary education, and know a lot of facts, and so I can do a good job teaching adults. I guess, because I have these skills, I am often asked the same question. I can't tell you how many times people outside this church ask me, "Have you ever wanted to be a real minister with a church of your own?" This, of course, is ridiculous. School teachers know that you may not get the greatest financial rewards from working with children, but of course, we do not say, "Let's only let those who are not skilled enough to do other things work with our children." The truth is that working with children is an important calling.

I was going to have you stand up as I called out the following list, but I thought that if I had you shout out last week during the sermon, and move around this week, that might be more than Lud could handle when he comes back in to town next Sunday. Instead, just think about where you fit in these categories. If you haven't been thanked before, let us say thank you now, to all of you who have been Sunday School teachers, have helped with VBS, the nursery, been youth leaders, helped with It's Elementary or Tweens, are a parent, or grandparent, or aunt, or uncle, have been a school teacher, or coach or scout leader. We thank you for welcoming our own children and for your servant hood to them. However, just as is true with needs around the world, I am sorry, but your work is not yet finished. Perhaps we should say we are glad your work is not done. A recent survey found that for many Presbyterian congregations, the median age of members is 60 years old. That is not true in our congregation. We are blessed with children and families, and if there is work to do, all of us are called to do it. We are still called to servant hood to the littlest, the least, and the lost.

It is often true that we see little reward for our work. One of the easiest volunteer jobs to fill is Senior High youth leaders, because the young people are old enough to be fun, and to show leadership, and growth and to show strong work in missions. Another area that is fun is the nursery. Did you know you can volunteer to be a "Sunday Sitter," and do nursery duty so that our young parents can get a break from being nursery helpers? Other positions are sometimes harder to fill, but we have those who work with our children week after week. My question to you is, what are you doing to welcome a child in Jesus' name? What kind of servant hood to a child are you doing? To all of you who have already done your fair share, I say, "Thanks!" Now Jesus calls you to do more. There is no retirement from servant hood. If you are someone very powerful or important, you are called to humble yourself. If you are a person who feels powerless, you too are called to continue to serve.

The truth is that a lot of life consists of trudging along. From the story of Adam and Eve until the present time, human life consists of work, stress, and struggle. Sometimes,

if we are lucky, we get those experiences on the mountain top. Sometimes we may hear the adulation of the crowd. Most of the time, however, we are just doing our jobs, doing our duties, and carrying on. We may long for glory, but we don't have anything to complain about. We are doing well.

The real truth is that the one who was most deserving of glory chose servant hood. He washed his disciples' feet. He was betrayed by one of his best friends. He was spit upon and mocked. He faced the humiliation of a trial. He suffered the pain of death, abandoned by the men who had followed him so closely. He chose this path for our sakes, became a servant for us, and for our salvation. He did so to end our pain and our slavery to the fear of death. He calls us to respond, not so that we get extra candy for being kind, but out of gratitude and humility. We may think we are great and powerful in this world. In spite of our sin of pride, Christ died for us, imperfect as we are, still people grasping for glory. Instead of a reward, we are given a task. We are called to reach out to the littlest, the least, and the lost, to be a servant to those in need, and to do so in the name of the Suffering Servant, Jesus Christ, our Lord.

Barbara Stoop
Westminster Presbyterian Church
February 28, 2010