

Sermon for September 30, 2018
Pastor Martha Schwehn Bardwell
Numbers 11:4-6, 10-16, 24-29
Mark 9:38-50

It's been a heavy week. This morning maybe some of us feel a little like Moses in our story from Numbers when he cries out to God. He's angry, he's exhausted, he's feeling so burdened by his people and their rebellion. Perhaps some of us this morning are feeling like that – angry, exhausted, and like the burdens in this country, in our lives, in the world are just so hard on our bodies and spirits – the burdens of patriarchy, the burdens of our economy, the burdens of fractured relationships – we are fed up.

Back to Moses for a minute. Did you notice that things change a bit for him when the spirit is spread out over 70 elders? Now there are others to share the burdens and to share in the prophetic task. And - out beyond this official gathering of elders, back in the camp where the rest of the people are, the spirit speaks through Eldad and Medad as well. When Moses hears about it we can hear his relief, his desperation and hope when he declares, "Would that all God's people were prophets, and that God's spirit be given to them all!"

There was an Eldad and Medad moment in Washington a couple of days ago. Two brave women showed up – not in the official chamber where the testimonies were taking place – but back in a public elevator. Perhaps you saw the video. The footage begins with one woman – a survivor - crying out to a Senator, "**Don't look away from me. Look at me** and tell me that it doesn't matter what happened to me." You can see from the Senator's face and body language that he is very uncomfortable and tense; he's averting his eyes at first, looking at the ground. But he does look. And for a few moments, these women insist, insist!, that he not look away from their pain or from his calling as a leader to seek justice and healing in our country.

Look at me. This was a prophetic moment, to be sure. And, a moment that captures so well the cry of every marginalized person to those who have power over their bodies and future. **Look at me**, see my humanity!

Unfortunately, so often we humans find that it's hard to look. It's easier to look away, or to look out only for oneself or one's tribe. It's hard to face the pain and suffering of others, particularly when you feel like you have something to lose from really looking and seeing what it demands from you.

The section of Mark's gospel that we get today is part of a much longer discourse that we've been following for a few weeks now. Jesus has been telling the disciples about what his messianic journey is going to look like. **Look at me**, Jesus has been saying. I am going to become a victim – I will be betrayed, and suffer, and die at the hands of the authorities, and rise again. But the disciples just can't look. It's too hard for them. Instead of looking at Jesus, and engaging him about what they find so painful and difficult – what do they do? They start arguing among themselves about who is the greatest. Talking about their credentials! They start looking after their own egos...they are looking after their desire for prestige.

So Jesus does something to disrupt this. He says to them, "Whoever wants to be first must be *last of all and servant of all*." Humility, and compassion - this is what the greatness of discipleship is supposed to look like. Then Jesus takes a little child and sets her in his lap. And he says, "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me and the one who sent me."

Our gospel for this morning comes right on the heels of this teaching. Jesus is still sitting there with a child in his lap, having uttered these profound words about hospitality towards children, and what do the disciples do – do they engage with the child – welcoming her? Could Jesus give them any clearer cue to do just that – "whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me?" Perhaps the disciples are just too dumbstruck – but do they ask Jesus what this all means?

No. John carries on with something that sounds like a total non sequitur. But it doesn't come out of nowhere - his question rises from what he's looking at. He's not looking at Jesus, not at the child, but at himself and what he has to gain. We hear John wanting to look like a good cop for Jesus: "Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us." Look at me, Jesus, I was trying to protect your honor. Look at *me*, Jesus, John is saying.

Well John does not get the pat on the back, the smile of approval and the promotion to the job of chief disciple that he was perhaps looking for. Instead Jesus challenges John's vision in a few ways. First Jesus pushes John to imagine more than an us and them – "Whoever is not against us is for us" he says– and to see a world where compassionate action – even sharing a cup of water – is part of the reign of God.

And then Jesus changes his tone. Holding that child on his lap, Jesus wants to drive a point home. He has them look at her. Really look at her. He says "If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea. If

your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life maimed than to have two hands and to go to hell, to the unquenchable fire.”

With these harsh words, Jesus wants the disciples to make no mistake about it. The lives of faith that they lead need to be accountable to the little ones. The disciples should not center themselves and their egos and their desire for greatness as they follow Christ – they should center the wellbeing of the littlest and least among them, the children, the marginalized, the overlooked - and they should seek to clear away any stumbling blocks that would get in the way of these ones.

Jesus says that there are consequences for the disciples and for the community if they overlook or harm the little ones. Jesus uses the vivid and serious imagery of sinking in the sea or burning in the fires of hell as the destiny for those who would ignore this calling to care for the little ones.

It turns out that we condemn ourselves to a living hell if we ignore others’ humanity, and if we deny the truth that we live an interconnected existence. Theologian Daniel Migliore describes hell this way, “hell is simply wanting to be oneself apart from God’s grace and in isolation from others.... Hell is self-destructive resistance to the eternal love of God.”

Jesus came to save us from living in self-destructive resistance to the eternal love of God. Jesus came to save us from the hells we create, when we refuse to really look. To look at victims, survivors, children – to look at all who might be dismissed as ‘too little’ to be taken seriously – to look at all who cry out to be seen. God in Jesus came as a little child among us, as a little helpless infant, and remained a poor man his whole life, a poor man whose life and movement was little compared to the Temple authorities and the Roman empire. The authorities tried to put an end to his little life and his little movement of love and mercy, condemning him to die among criminals. But as we Christians know and profess by faith, this little one, this suffering messiah, rose again. **Look at me**, the risen Jesus says. Look at how God’s love and life and mercy cannot be stopped – not by any stumbling block!

We come together this morning called by the spirit, to be formed together as the body of Christ for the world. We come so that we might receive healing from God and that we might become agents of healing for each other and the world. That healing flows here, when we bring little ones to the center. It flows here, when we center the suffering ones in our prayers for the world. It flows here, when we confess our sin and ask God to shape us again, to open our eyes again to look at each other and at God with humility and compassion that is the greatness of discipleship we are called to.

And it flows here in the meal we share. In a moment we are about to get a piece of bread in our hands. Just a little bit. As you hold the bread or wafer in your hand, marvel for a moment at this little piece. Marvel that God shares God's life with us, through a little bread, and through the little ones in the world who are asking to be seen and welcomed. May the God who welcomes us to Christ's table bless us for the holy work of welcome, of blessing, of looking, of prophesying, for the sake of the world. Amen.