

August 29, 2010
Mark 9:30-37

Susan Cooke Kittredge
Charlotte Congregational Church

To See or Not to See

A lot of ink has been spilled on books of biblical interpretation--a whole lot. Scholars have dissected every passage of scripture with compulsive attention. When preachers approach a specific text, more resources are available than they will ever need. At the very least what I find useful are commentaries that address a specific week's prescribed lectionary readings. The Revised Common Lectionary is a three-year cycle of Biblical Readings, Years A, B, and C. Across the world most Main Line Protestant Denominations and those in the Catholic Church follow the Lectionary. The idea is that over a three-year period, those who follow the lectionary will pretty much have heard most of the Bible. Now, if you just detected a qualification in that description, you'd be right. Because some passages never make it into the Lectionary; they are deemed too offensive for our sensitive ears. I've been tempted in my career to preach on the expunged passages for a stretch to provide a flavor for what the people of Ancient Israel heard as well as what the current church has decided we simply can't bear.

In preparing for today's sermon, several commentaries I read expressed shock that the passage we heard from Proverbs about the good wife was even included in the lectionary. "Read it if you must," they advised, "but don't preach on it!" Which stirs my rebellious heart and leads me to do just that. But I demurred. It is worthwhile, though, to note that this was not a controversial text for its intended listeners. It addressed the current cultural situation and was not the least bit inflammatory, but on the contrary, probably fairly soothing and affirming. It was the gospel text that would have been shocking to hear.

Heeding the advice to choose another text, however, I settled comfortably on this morning's gospel reading, about caring for children. Ah, yes, I thought, a nice love-your-kids passage. In reality, it is precisely these texts that make me nervous because what sounds on the surface pleasant usually has disturbing undertones. Such is certainly the case here.

It is worth noting that Jesus is addressing his disciples when he uses the example, the disciples who throughout Mark's gospel repeatedly fall short. They just don't understand much of what is going on; they bumble along after Jesus like puppies, sometimes getting it but mostly just following the leader. So when Jesus predicts his arrest, crucifixion and resurrection, they stare dumbfounded. Not understanding or believing that their leader will be killed and subsequently be raised from the dead is nothing to fault them for. There are some of us who still have trouble holding this to be true, and that's after the fact. Such a wild prediction understandably made little sense to them. But they didn't ask Jesus about it. They fell silent, Mark says. I suspect that none of them wanted to reveal their bafflement by asking a question. None wanted to appear stupid or confused. We all do that on occasion, refrain from asking a question so as not to reveal the fact that we don't understand. Or, if we're courageous, we excuse our inquiry by saying, "I have a stupid question, but ..."

Walking on to Capernaum, Jesus drops the subject and probably lets them walk on by themselves for a while. With Jesus a safe distance away, they resume their chatter. And what do they talk about? Which among them is greatest. Good, humble, generous disciples that they are. I need to interject something here: most scholars agree that in Mark's gospel especially the disciples represent the church. Obviously, there was no established Christian Church in Jesus' time. In fact the word for church appears only three times in all the gospels. The disciples, the ones who will go on to spread the word of Jesus, they are the church. And they suffer from many of the shortcomings that we do; they don't understand, they don't ask questions, they are vain, posturing and concerned with success, power and appearances. When you hear that Jesus is talking to the disciples, realize that he is addressing us.

Among Jesus' attributes, I'm always amazed at his hearing. He has an uncanny way of knowing what people in another room have been saying. He knows that the disciples have been showing off their plumage to one another, like randy peacocks. So he bursts their bubble by calling them to him and saying in no uncertain terms that

whoever would be first must be last and servant of all. Certainly not what they wanted to hear.

Jesus then picks up a child, an act in Jewish cultural tradition that was fraught with meaning. As you may know Jewish ancestry is followed down through the female line. With all the cultic and tribal influences constantly threatening Israel and Judah, with villages being ransacked and women carted off, one never knew who the father of a baby really was. The mother was, naturally, never in doubt. So in order to be considered Jewish, one's mother had to be Jewish.

As I may have mentioned before, I went to a school in New York that took the kids the other private schools rejected. Therefore, in the middle of the twentieth century, the Dalton school admitted Jews and children of divorce. These were the cultural rejects of the time. My parents wanted my brother and sister and me to have a liberal education, so we were instantly made the rejects among the rejects because we were WASPS. But I learned quickly that if I wanted to be accepted, I had to unearth some Jewish heritage. So I did what many kids do in fourth grade: I lied. Knowing the female ascendancy of lineage, I said that my grandmother on my mother's side was Jewish. I actually doubt if any of my friends believed me.

In Ancient Israel, the tradition of the father's picking up a child immediately after its birth affirmed his acceptance of the responsibility of caring for the child. This was as well a Roman tradition. If, on the other hand, the father did not lift the child up, the child was abandoned. It appears that the majority of the abandoned children were not eaten by the wolves, though no doubt some were. Most of the time they were gathered into another household, either because a couple was infertile or a family needed another set of hands in the field. (Marcus, Joel. "Counting Diamonds." *Christian Century*. August 30-September 6, 2000. 8621.)

Children did not occupy the place in society that they do for us here today. I've been tempted to remark recently that what we need around here is a little elder worship. We put the needs of our children first, which in balance is probably a good thing. *The New York Times* on Monday ran an article about the lengths colleges have had to go to in

order to extricate incoming freshmen from their parents' clutches; they are called "Velcro parents" (*The New York Times*, Monday August 23, 2010, page 1) Colleges and universities institute Parting ceremonies and elaborate receptions for the parents so they will leave their kids alone to settle into their dorms. I see many young couples who are so overextended because of their children's needs that they hardly know each other any more. We forget that the greatest gift we give our children is a healthy and happy marriage, not a new skateboard or bicycle, or dance lessons, not being at every single soccer game, not always putting our relationships last. I don't mean to suggest for a minute that this is true throughout our country; certainly it is not. Many, many children still go without food, adequate shelter, emotional support and medical care. Unwanted babies are, in fact, chucked in dumpsters or left in trash bags at rest stops on the Interstate. When I talk about catering to our children, adoring our children, I am speaking to this loving and lucky congregation.

In Jesus' time children were at the bottom of the barrel, they were virtually expendable, they were invisible. So when he suggests that they are the ones who must be served and honored and cared for, it was shocking, far more shocking than the idea would be to us today.

So who are today's children? Who in our culture occupies the bottom of the heap, who is last that should be first, who is invisible? It is apparently not our inclination as individuals or as a society to elevate the marginalized. In economic and social policy we seem to be bent on having the first be first and the last be left. Wealth and position yield power and influence. In reaction to the disciples' desire to be great, Jesus clearly states that the one who cares for the least among them shall be greatest.

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 eminently qualified people. 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 let's interview the janitor at each place, asking him what he thinks of the man seeking to be our president. This was done and a janitor gave such a

glowing appraisal of William MacElvaney that he was selected President of St. Paul's School of Theology.

Somebody on that search committee understood, in a flash of genius, that those who live close to Christ become so secure in His love that they no longer relate to other people according to rank or power or money or prestige. They treat janitors and governors with equal dignity. They regard everybody as a VIP.

Jesus is suggesting not only that we welcome those who are last, but that in doing so we welcome him and God. What we're looking for here is God. I saw God this morning in a whispered sunrise, in the very top leaves of some maple trees whispering the tune of their orchestral symphony that is scheduled to play next month. I see God in your faces, gathered for worship. It's easy to see God in the beauty that surrounds us, in the face of our beloved, in the majesty of music and song. What is being suggested here is that the discarded baby, wet from birth, wailing in the dumpster, is Jesus too.

Living where we do, it can be difficult for us to see those who are marginalized in our society. If we lived in Burlington it would be a lot easier. But most of us are so insulated by our circumstances, routines and cars that we do not regularly mingle with the disenfranchised unless we make an intentional effort to do so. It's easy to forget that at the end of abandoned roads people are living in their cars and though it may seem not a miserable existence in the warmth of summer, it will soon become so with the coming cold. As we pass increasingly more For Sale signs in front of houses, we cringe at the imagined desperation that might afflict the family within. The somber financial news is not simply a headline in the paper or news on the radio, it is playing out right here in scary ways in our own neighborhood, in the lives of our friends, in many of our own lives.

Walk down the streets of Burlington with an eye to seeing God, to seeing the invisible in our society. I find myself trying not to see a lot of what happens on Church Street; I intentionally rein in my imagination when I begin wondering and worrying about the youth who congregate there.

It is the lost and forsaken, those who live on the margins, that Jesus calls us to lift up. It is a challenge and requires great faith and fortitude because it's hard and you get tired and dirty reaching into dumpsters to find God.

Thirty years ago, when our daughter Eliza was two months old, we were invited to a Christmas Party down in Warren. We took her with us because she was so young. It was a fine party but when it came time to leave Charlie and I noticed that one of the guests had clearly had too much to drink and he was headed towards his car. Taking keys away from people who were drunk was just beginning to be a public campaign. So after some wrestling and trickery, we managed to get his keys from him. He was not happy; he was insulted and angry and embarrassed, all of which were heightened because he was drunk. We decided that Charlie would drive him home in his car and I would follow with Eliza in ours. The hitch was that we had very little gas and it was beginning to snow. But we knew this was the right thing to do, even though we didn't want to. Well, we got lost because he couldn't manage to direct us to his house in his altered state. All the while the snow was falling, Eliza was beginning to wake and want to nurse, the gas gauge was sinking more deeply into the red and it was getting later and later. Of course we had no cell phones; Charlie couldn't call and tell me what was happening, so with growing anxiety I followed his circuitous path through the valleys and hills. Only later did I find out that his drive had been more disturbing than mine as he found himself, while driving, the recipient of repeated sexual advances.

When we did finally arrive at the house around 1 a.m., Charlie got in our car and told me that our charge had a gas tank in his garage and was going to get it for us. We waited while he went in through a side door. The lights flicked on in the garage, the door opened and there he was standing not with a gas tank but with a gun. Charlie, bravely or stupidly, jumped out of our car and into his and we both gunned the engines and spun out of the village. Soon we abandoned our car by the side of the road when it sputtered to a stop and drove on in his. Eliza was howling by then, crying for the three of us, I thought. Through a few more bumps and snags, we did finally get home around 3 a.m. but neither Charlie nor I slept much. I was angry and frightened. Angry that we had tried to do

something right and had ended up putting our baby in harm's way. But what seemed clear to me, in that Advent season, was that we had been trying to treat this man as a child of God and we got dirty. The next day I just felt sullied and I recall remarking to someone that the body of Christ is filthy and helping others is not rewarding but discouraging and sometimes dangerous.

Unfortunately, I think that's the kind of ministry that Jesus is speaking of to the disciples. The kind where you give more than is comfortable, where you venture into dangerous territory, where you lift up the poor, the weak, the broken-hearted and care for them, for Christ's sake. I don't need to point out that those who feel they live on the edge are not always homeless or destitute. They may be sitting next to you right now, or at home staring at a wall, or in a different state waiting for you to phone.

Jesus has called us all to lives of love, generosity and grace. May we find the courage, the strength, the faith and the time to answer.

Amen.