

Conley Memorial Presbyterian Church, 17<sup>th</sup> Sunday After Pentecost, Sept. 20, 2015

**Talking to Children?**  
Dr. Kenneth Humphreys  
September 20, 2015

Mark 9:30-37

The New Testament Lectionary readings for today are a portion of James 3 & 4 and the passage from Mark which I have just read.

As I was thinking about today's message I was in a quandary as to which of the two readings to select for today's sermon as both passages have strong messages for us.

The selection from James relates to what it means to have wisdom and how wisdom affects the choices that you make in your daily life.

The selection from Mark is a resurrection story, Christ's prediction of his betrayal and resurrection using a child as the object of the lesson that he is teaching his disciples.

It was almost a coin toss for me as to which of the two passages to discuss this morning.

This year is my sixth year of serving as chaplain at Boy Scout Camp Bud Schiele in Rutherford County. When I am at the camp I deal with hundreds of children and that annual experience made me opt for the passage from Mark.

While at the camp, for obvious reasons when dealing with hundreds of boys of all faiths, including many who are not Christian, I obviously can't preach to them about Jesus but I certainly can, and do, talk to them about God.

In our scripture reading Jesus was endeavoring to squelch the disciples' hankering for greatness and used a child as an illustration of what it means to be great in the Kingdom of God. Today we at times romanticize our children. Those of us who are grandparents as I am are particularly prone to doing that, but back in Jesus' time that wasn't true. Children had no status, power or rights of any kind. They literally were not considered to be much more than property. They weren't full persons. For the most part they were dependent, vulnerable and unlearned. They were entirely subject to the authority of their father. The Zondervan Commentary<sup>1</sup> says, "*The rabbis classified*

*children with the deaf, the dumb, the weak-minded, and slaves ... To become as a child basically means to recognize one's insignificance.*" That is the context of Jesus' words to his disciples.

He has just told them once again that he would be betrayed, that he would be killed, and that he would rise again on the third day but they didn't understand and were afraid to ask him to explain.

Isn't that what children often do? They hear something that an adult tells them, they don't understand, or in some cases don't want to understand, and they are afraid to ask for an explanation. Hopefully when I talk to the boys at the Scout Camp about God, they do understand. I think that most of them do, but I know that many will not understand everything I say and don't ask. That is just the way children are. But so are many adults.

Children also often are jockeying with each other for recognition and are competing with each other for status. I see that with Scouts that I call "badge hounds." They do everything possible to accumulate more and more awards and patches to sew onto their uniform sashes to show off how great they are, or how great they think they are. That is a sign of immaturity and desire for recognition and it isn't limited to children. Adults too have this tendency. I know Scout leaders who cover their uniforms with all manner of patches and awards and who seem to be on an endless quest to receive more and more things to attach to their uniforms. They are like the squabbling disciples in our scripture reading.

Who is the greatest among us? Who will get to sit at the right hand of Christ in the Kingdom?

William Barclay<sup>2</sup> commented that the squabbling, "*... shows how far the disciples were from realizing the real meaning of Jesus' Messiah-ship ... Repeatedly he has told them what awaited him in Jerusalem and yet they were still thinking of his Kingdom in earthly terms and of themselves as his chief ministers of state. There is something heart-breaking in the thought of Jesus going towards a Cross and his disciples arguing about who would be the greatest.*"

But when Jesus asked them, "*... what they had been arguing about they had nothing to say. It was the silence of shame ... So long as they thought that Jesus was not listening and that Jesus had not seen, the argument about who should be greatest*

*seemed fair enough [to them], but when that argument had to be stated in the presence of Jesus it was seen in all its unworthiness.” Jesus had to sit the disciples down and teach them, telling them that greatness in his Kingdom could only be found, not by being masters but by being servants of all.*

*Barclay went on to say, “The really great persons, the people who are remembered as having made a real contribution to life, are the people who said to themselves not, ‘How can I use ... society to further my own prestige and my own personal ambitions?’ but, ‘How can I use my personal gifts and talents to serve others?’*

*“Every economic problem would be solved if people lived for what they could do for others and not for what they could get for themselves. Every political problem would be solved if the ambition of people was to serve others and not to enhance their own prestige. The divisions and disputes which tear the church and society asunder would for the most part never occur if only the desire of people was to serve without caring what position they occupied. When Jesus spoke to the supreme greatness and value of a person whose ambition was to be a servant, he laid down one of the greatest practical truths in the world.”*

That is what I try to teach the children at the Scout Camp and what I hope to impart on you each Sunday.

**Amen**

1. Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary, Clinton E. Arnold, general ed., Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2002
2. William Barclay, “The Gospel of Mark”, rev. ed., Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, KY, 1975 (Quotes have been rephrased or paraphrased to make them gender neutral).