

Date: Sunday September 20, 2009

Scripture: Mark 9:30-37

Title: “Welcoming Jesus”

The Message of Scripture (Sermon Thesis): Jesus reminds us to reach out and welcome all others in his name, particularly those on the margins of society.

The Sharing of the Good News (The Sermon Purpose): God welcomes all and that means us, too.

(Remember, it’s all about God!)

“It’s a beautiful day in the neighborhood, a beautiful day for a neighbor. Would you be mine? Could you be mine?” Does anybody know that theme song? Yes, that is the theme song to Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood. The late Fred Rogers’, television neighborhood gave so much to two generations of American children. If you’ve never seen it, or you’re having a bad day, find it on the PBS and you will be changed for the better.

Fred Rogers was also a Presbyterian minister, a model of ministry for UCC pastor, The Reverend Rochelle Stackhouse. She writes about the first time she met him. “I was standing with a group of adults and several small children waiting for an elevator at Princeton Seminary. The doors opened, and to our great surprise, out stepped Fred Rogers. As the adults all spoke to him, he completely ignored us and kneeled down to address the children. Only after he had spoken to each one of the children did he stand back up and speak to the taller people present. Other folk who knew him well told me that was always his pattern. A tall man, he regularly got down to see the world at the same level as children did, and that is part of what

made him the great interpreter of the world to children.

Jesus' disciples thought they stood tall, all caught up in deciding who was going to get the corner office in the heavenly court, who was going to be seated in the place of highest honor at the Holy banquet, and whose title was going to reflect how respected they were by God and their community. We know that routine from academia, corporate America, politics, or even, unfortunately, sometimes the church. James has tagged that attitude perfectly in today's epistle reading: envy, ambition, boasting, conflict, and dispute. Are you starting to get a picture of what was happening in today's reading from Mark (Stackhouse)?

In that reading, Jesus takes the disciples minds off of being the greatest, at least temporarily, and shows them by way of example that the greatest are the children. Jesus took a child, put the child right in the middle of the room, then held the child and said, "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me" (Mark 9:37, NRSV). The disciples must have been astonished. In all likelihood, they were not great interpreters of the world to children and before Jesus' lesson they probably would not have even noticed the child.

You see, in ancient times, the children were on the far margins of society. No one paid attention to the children. To welcome unknown children, and we have no indication that Jesus would have known this child, in fact we might assume that this child was a child of a servant, meaning even further on the fringes, to welcome an unknown child rather than the rich and famous would bring no honor. But Jesus is

saying that welcoming the powerless is actually welcoming the most powerful; the one who sent him (NRSV).

Now we know that the disciples have a difficult and challenging time following the teachings of Jesus. Mark makes that very clear. Today's episode is no exception. Just a little later in Mark, people are bringing children to Jesus and the disciples attempt to intervene. As Mark illustrates, the disciples spoke sternly to the people for bringing children. Jesus again has to direct the disciples to let the children come to him and says that the kingdom of God belongs to the children (Mark 10:13). Same subject - lesson number two.

This emphasis on children might seem a bit strange to us. In our society, where many go to what might seem like inordinate extremes to protect children, like keeping them from watching a speech by the president of the United States, all this attention on children by Jesus might appear unnecessary. Although even in the 21st Century those who serve the children: day care workers, pre-school teachers, nannies, foster parents, and teachers, are often among the lowest paid and lowest status workers. So even though children have a different place in our society from the ancient time, we still value those who serve our children far less than those who do other "useful" jobs like playing football in the NFL. Jesus, while presenting to his disciples an idea for a way of determining true greatness, is also willing to be one who serves the lowest of the low (Stackhouse).

Who is the lowest of the low in the world today? Who is it that goes unnoticed? Who is it that we could bring into the middle of the room and shock

others by saying, “Whoever welcomes this person, welcomes Jesus.” Is it the man standing beside the road with the sign that reads, “Will work for food?” We have all probably offered that man a questioning look or a snicker as we joke with others in the car about his offer. Maybe it is the homeless man lying in the bushes outside the church building on a Sunday morning. I’m sure you have all heard the story or seen the email about the man in tattered clothes with the long uncut hair stretched out between the bushes and the church building in another town a long, long way from here. Every one of the church members walked by the man muttering questions about why that guy was there and what they were going to do to get that man out of the bushes and away from the church. Then, to their great horror, the man walked into the church just as services were about to begin. Slowly he walked up the center aisle. People were aghast. Then, about the time he reached the front of the church, he stopped, turned around, and took off his hat, took off his coat, and then pulled off his wig and his beard. About at that point the people in the church became aware that it was the pastor all dressed up in a costume. They were obviously relieved and many started to laugh. The pastor stopped them. He reminded the congregation that as they walked by him, or as they walked by any person lying by the church or a man holding a sign by the street, they were walking by Jesus Christ. When you do it to the least of these, you do it to me (Matthew 25:40).

Who would we be shocked to see in the middle of the room? A couple of years ago there was a great controversy about the UCC church in California that was debating rather or not to allow a convicted sex offender into the church as a

member. We had discussions here about what we might do if we were made away of a similar situation. I'm sure that topic would still bring up varying thoughts and ideas about how a church, and how we, should handle such a matter.

This week a related item on Headline News got my attention. A church in Kentucky ordained a registered sex offender as a minister. Now I'm not about to preach that this is the right thing for the church to do, nor am I going to condemn the church for the action they took. I don't have all the facts and I am in no position to make a judgment. But the idea has stuck in my head and I have gone back and forth all week thinking about this decision. I have talked with people about their ideas on the subject. I am going to continue to see what information I can find and what develops with the story. My point in sharing this with you is to raise the question about welcoming those on the margins of our society, as children were in the ancient time, and to wonder aloud about what extent we go to welcoming Jesus Christ into the midst of our lives.

That's the main point from today's passage. Jesus didn't just say to be welcoming people, but "whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me" (Mark 9:37). Welcoming Jesus amongst us is more than just being friendly, warm, and hospitable. It is reaching out and embracing each person that seeks to be with us and it is going out and meeting those who previously have been told or taught that they are not to be a part of us. We welcome all. Now that doesn't mean we call a registered sex offender as a pastor. But exclusion is a slippery slope and when we start not doing this and not doing that, keeping people

out and away from the table can become a rapid fire activity that goes against the teaching of Jesus. I don't know for sure about you, but I don't want to sit in the seat of the one who decides who's in and who's out. I would rather error on the side of inclusion and work towards finding a way to welcome all.

And that's today's good news. God welcomes all. Any of us have traits, personalities, or characteristics that keep us out of one organization or another. But in God's world, all are welcome and we are smack dab in the middle of God's world. Here the words again, all are welcome.

I'll close today with a quote from the book, "The World According to Mister Rogers." While this thought is written about children, let's be thinking of others that we could include in this passage. "Please think of the children first. If you ever have anything to do with their entertainment, their food . . . their custody, their day or night care, their health care, their education – listen to the children, learn about them, learn from them. Think of children first (Rogers). With thanks to Mr. Rogers, I will add, think of any deemed unworthy first and welcome Jesus.

Let us pray.

Lord, we want to learn to welcome you. We can see you in others, all others, but

we must look for you. We expect others to see you in us, but we know they don't always. Show us again about your welcoming ways and your hospitality that is extended to all people starting with those who are neglected and we hope to embrace them as Holy and Almighty upon this earth. This we pray in your name. Amen.

Offering:

Let us share all that has been entrusted to our keeping. As we do, we are acknowledging God's love for us. The ushers will please . . .

Dedication:

Lord, we ask that you accept and bless this offering and prepare it for the many ways it will be used sharing your good news in the world. This we pray, Amen.

Benediction:

With the memory of our welcome here, we prepare now to go out in the world and welcome others – all others – as children of God. In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit go forth.

Amen and Amen.

Sources:

Holy Bible; New Revised Standard Version; Harper Bibles: San Francisco, CA; 2007.

Lectionary Homiletics; www.goodpreacher.com; 2009.

Rogers, Fred; "The World According to Mister Rogers"; Gift Books: New York, NY; 2004.

"Won't You Be My Neighbor"; song lyrics; pbskids.org; 2009.