

A Kinder Humankind [Text - Mark 9:33-37]

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In the wild and somewhat wacky Presidential election that lies ahead of us, you and I are going to hear a lot - from a lot of rich and powerful people - about how deeply they care for the poor and oppressed people in this country. And while I'd really like to believe it's true, some of the language that some of the candidates use, raises some serious doubts. The Republican frontrunner finds all kinds of descriptive words to tout his enormous wealth; yet claims to have no "time for political correctness!" Apparently, finding words that don't offend and demean minorities, women, or the poor, is just too time consuming for Mr. Trump. On the flip side, the Democratic frontrunner's claim to be in touch with the poor and downtrodden, includes a strange redefining of the term "dead-broke!" Apparently, after leaving the White House [and putting \$855,000 down on their new 2.8 million-dollar D.C. home] the Clintons were like all the other "dead-broke" poor people throughout the land.

Let's face it, many of the exceptionally rich and powerful people in this country - politicians and CEO's alike - have no inkling of how it feels to be truly poor or powerless. They're so accustomed to using their wealth and power to get what they *want*, that they really can't comprehend what it means to *be* in want. For many of them, the faceless poor are simply pawns to be controlled and used, rather than people to be cared for and uplifted. Now of course, not all those with high positions or great power use it in a self-serving way. Jesus was an exceptionally powerful person; yet his power was rooted and grounded in his deep desire to act as a genuine and compassionate Child of God. For Jesus, this meant graciously lifting up the lowly, humbly serving those in need, and faithfully following the path of Divine love and grace, even though it led him to the Cross. Jesus rightly claims the title of the *Messiah* - the Christ - because he willingly takes-on the role of the humble, vulnerable servant, described by Isaiah and other Hebrew prophets.

In this morning's reading, when Jesus declares that "the greatest" among us is to be the "servant of all", it creates a striking contrast to the way in which people often think about Life. That's why his disciples have such a hard time understanding what he means. So Jesus sits down, gathers them around and says, "Whoever wants to be first, must be last of all and servant of all." Then, to drive the point home, Jesus gives them a concrete example. He takes a little child into his arms and says, "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name, welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me, welcomes not only me, but the One who sent me!"

To "welcome a *child*" means that you and I graciously receive *any* individual who society normally dismisses as being small and insignificant - those who lack any power, prestige or influence of their own. The Holy One's children come in all ages and sizes, races and social strata. And in the Name of the Holy One, Jesus calls you and me to welcome every one of them, regardless of who they are! The fantastic thing about this, is that when you and I *do* it, we not only come to recognize the Divine Value of other people - we also come to a fuller understanding of our own Divine Worth!

Twenty-six years ago, when I acknowledged that I was gay, I could no longer serve as a pastor in the Lutheran Church. Fortunately, there was another field where I could apply my experience and education. I went to work with people with developmental disabilities, and eventually got a job at Goodwill Rehabilitation Center in Columbus. I figured I would still be doing something to help make a positive difference in the lives of others; and to some degree, I did. What I didn't realize, however, was the remarkable difference that those other people would make in *my* life.

At that time, in the eyes of my church, my family, and to a certain extent, *myself*, I was "damaged goods" - no longer worthy of welcome or inclusion. Yet in my new job at Goodwill, I immediately discovered a remarkably welcoming and supportive community and family. After *years* in the church of hearing - and preaching - about Divine *Grace*, I found my deepest experience of that *Grace* among a group of people

with no particular religious background, or *baggage!* I was overwhelmed by the openness, acceptance, and love that I received from those people with whom - and for whom - I worked.

People who have a pronounced mental or physical impairment have no “closet” in which to hide; and in this regard, they definitely have a lot of valuable things to teach us all. They remind us that we *all* have our abilities, *and* our disabilities; and that every person, great or small, needs the understanding, care and compassion of others in order to develop and thrive. And while we so-called “normal” people often try to hide our insecurities behind our words or wealth - our personal power or intellectual prowess - people with disabilities are so much more open and honest. They tend to share their joy and sorrow, excitement and disappointment, gratitude and anger - but chiefly their genuine love - with a transparency that humbles our hypocrisy. People with perceptible disabilities can help us re-connect with our own fragile, inner-child; thereby offering us a tender therapeutic touch - provided that we’re willing to get close to them!

I am, and will always be, deeply grateful for the inner-healing that I received from my friends at Goodwill. These beautiful people, who could look at me and accept me for who I was, taught me to look at Life in a fresh and refreshing way: through the eyes of an imperfect, yet perfectly loved child of God! When Jesus talks to his friends about seeing Life from a new perspective, he doesn’t use complex religious language. He simply takes a child into his arms and says, “Look! This is what it’s really all about! This is how the Divine Realm is to be seen and experienced - not through the grand and glorious things [or people] of this world, but in the small and fragile and so-called *ordinary*.” And thus, a remarkable truth is revealed: That when you and I truly see those people who are considered “less” in the eyes of society, it is then that we will truly see -and know - the Divine, Transcendent Presence!

So maybe the next time you and I feel disconnected from God - when we feel like our lives are meaningless or worthless - we can rediscover our sense of purpose and belonging, by reaching out to those around

us who truly need our compassion and care. Because when you and I actually see those people who the rich and powerful often view as insignificant or invisible, we will begin to see the Hidden Holy One. And whenever you and I graciously welcome *any* vulnerable child of God into our hearts and lives, the Holy One quietly slips-in as well.