

Sermon – Mark 9:38-50  
David R. Lyle  
Grace Lutheran Church  
19 Pentecost – Year B  
30 September 2018

“But Seriously”

Sisters and brothers in Christ, grace be unto you and peace in the name of God the Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

1. Our Saturday was spent in the usual fashion. We were up early, eating a hearty breakfast and then out the door and off to Mount Prospect to cheer on Greta and the rest of the Grace runners in a huge cross country invitational. Then it was back to Oak Park and off to Maple Park to cheer on Torsten and the Hawks in park-district soccer for three and four-year olds – and, as you know, watching three and four-year olds play soccer is always good for the soul. Then, up to Andersen Park to see Anders and the rest of the Golden Dragons play in a more competitive, more something-that-looked-like-soccer, soccer match. It was a nail-biter; the Dragons acquitted themselves well in a blistering 0-0 draw. My favorite moment of the match came when, with play continuing, a boy on the other team stopped suddenly in front of me and the rest of the Golden Dragon cheering section. He looked up at our team flag, and then up at me, and with honest, big-brown-eyed confusion, asked: “Why are you cheering for *that* team.” I found myself a spokesman for our group and, and after a few seconds, said the only thing that I could think of: “Because they’re our kids.” He shrugged and ran off after the ball. To be sure, we weren’t cheering against the other team. Who roots against six-year olds? I mean, we’re not truly horrible people. We were just cheering on our kids. Because, you know, *they’re our kids*, and we want them to know we want the best for them, that we’re on their side.

2. Kids. Last week's gospel story ended with Jesus taking a little child into his arms. Pastor Lauren's sermon reminded us of the radicality of this action. Kids weren't thought of then as they are now; they were more nuisances than anything else. People waiting to happen, not people in and of themselves. But Jesus takes a child in his arms, saying, "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me." Jesus is declaring, in no uncertain terms, that he, and the God who sent him, are on the side of the least of these, those who are viewed through our sinful eyes as the lowest or of lesser value. Why is Jesus for them? Because they are his Father's children. Period.
  
3. The disciples, of course, just don't get it. It's easy to miss because the lectionary bifurcates the text, but verse 38 – wouldn't you know it? – follows immediately after verse 37. John, having earlier been caught arguing about which disciple was the greatest, responds to Jesus' teaching about welcoming children not with understanding, but by continuing to focus on himself – on where *he* fits into the story. With what strikes me as petulant privilege, he points away from his group, asking Jesus to do something about that guy over there doing good works in Jesus' name. Because he didn't share the same burnished credentials as the twelve, John wants him chastised. Note that John isn't really worried about this exorcist; John is worried that if *that guy* can be part of God's mission, than maybe John isn't as important as he thought he was. Jesus puts John in his place; if he's not against us, why worry about him?
  
4. But through all of this, notice that Jesus is still holding the child in his arms! And Jesus returns to his point: Anyone gets between me and this little one? Better to step into some cement shoes and go sleep with the fishes. Your hand in your way? Hack it off. Same with your foot! And if your eye causes you to stumble, better to pluck it out and walk into heaven with one eye than walk with both eyes straight into hell. Jesus, it seems, has a point to make,

and he uses language that is serious and jarring. Of course, since most of us remain two-handed, two-footed, two-eyed, and un-millstoned, the easy point to make is that Jesus is being hyperbolic. He doesn't really mean these things, doesn't really want us to do take his advice. And that's true, but not in the easy way we might imagine.

5. You see, *God really does care* about the ones we view as the littlest among us. For kids. For the poor. For you and me when we're down and out, sick or sorrowful. And for everyone for whom this week's new cycle evoked raw memories of assault or abuse. Jesus, in God's name, has taken all of these into his loving arms. Jesus extends God's arms to you this day with understanding, compassion, and belief. You want to get in the way of that? Make them stumble? Lead them to question the abundant compassion of our God? No. Better to suffer harm yourself than to come between Jesus and a fellow child of God.
  
6. Rather than leaving this stand as hyperbole, Jesus' words take on deadly-seriousness, shaped by the cross toward which he walks. Jesus goes knowingly to the cross, knowing that he would be wounded, struck down, and cut off so that we need not ever experience this fate. He is cut off from his Father so that we need not cut off our hands or eyes, so that we would not be cut off from God or each another. He himself walks open-eyed into the hells of this world and the next so that we need not fear hell in the next world, and so that we can bring comfort and hope into the human-made hells of this world. Jesus enters into all of this – the pain of our past, the pains we cause and endure in our present, the pains we fear from the future – in order bring healing and hope, an ending to suffering and an entry, together, into salvation. On the cross, Jesus is cut off so that we can be reunited, one body in Christ, the living body of this risen Christ.

7. And since that is the case, then we need to silence the voice of John the disciple that lives in our heads, that voice that is constantly worrying about where we fit, how we rank, or how our team is doing. We look at Jesus and see him holding the child, the refugee, the impoverished. We look at Jesus and see him comforting the marginalized, the oppressed, the assaulted. We look at Jesus, and grace of all graces, we see him holding us. We look at Jesus and see him cut off and crucified; we look at Jesus and see him raised. In Christ, we know peace. In Christ, we are salt for this world. In Christ, we are called to offer cups of water filled with compassion and consolation and life overflowing. Seriously. In the name of the One who has welcomed us, what else could we do? In Christ, we are on the side of God's children, simply because they – and we – have been chosen by God. Amen.

And now may the peace that passes all human understanding keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus, this day and forever. Amen.