

Today's Gospel reading is a scene from the life of Jesus.

He's an adult - he's got his Disciples and others with him - the 12 and other men and women who travel with him, learn from him, provision and cook for them, his "entourage."

As this scene opens, Jesus has been teaching and healing for months. Large crowds have been turning out to see and hear him. Thousands have been fed at huge gatherings. Since they are not rich, they travel on foot.

Mark writes here that they arrive in Capernaum, near the Sea of Galilee. Mark has already told us Capernaum is Jesus' adult home village. They're home. Take a break. Rest up. His house is there. They're home.

Listen to what happens, as they first get home. Jesus' house. Jesus' home. Listen

[ Mark 9:33 – 37 ]

"The Word of the Lord"

So. One day Jesus overheard Disciples arguing about who, among them, was the Greatest.

Their Rabbi Jesus had been instructing them for months and months. They'd been out on their own, in pairs, and were doing some of the stuff Jesus was doing. They were catching on to some of his teaching, some of the behavior he was modeling for them. Some were better at it than others, to be sure, sooo ... "Who was the greatest of the Disciples?"

"The greatest at what?!" we gotta ask. Surely Jesus was wondering "The greatest at what?!"

---

"I am the greatest!" said the athletic young man 45 years ago. And, soon enough, we learned he WAS the greatest, at two things:

Heavyweight Boxing - for over a decade, he "Danced like a butterfly, Stung like a bee"

Self Promotion - he became the most famous athlete in the world.

And then. That famous boxer wasn't seen for years and years

Many years later, we were watching the opening ceremonies of the Atlanta Olympics, part of a world-wide TV audience of Billions. The Olympic torch was being carried by the last few relay runners, in its journey from Athens Greece. Someone ran the torch up the long stairway of the huge stadium, to the giant cauldron where the flame would ignite.

At the top of the stairs, the young runner paused, and handed the torch to an older man who walked out from behind a curtain. The large man accepted the torch, and held it high over his head, and, as the camera slowly moved in for a close-up, we saw that his arms and legs were shaking, standing there in his white athletic shorts outfit.

Finally the camera was close enough we said "Look who that is. That's him. What do you know, that's him." We saw it was our boxer of 40 years ago, no longer strong, no longer loud and rhyming, standing there weakened by the Parkinson's Disease we'd heard he had.

And it dawned on me, that everyone with loved ones racked with debilitating and progressive diseases were watching, and would "take heart" – were, through him, INCLUDED in this two week gathering and competition of the best athletes in the world.

Included. Weakened by disease and infirmity, maybe. Yet - Unashamed. Welcomed. Honored.

---

“Who is the greatest?” They asked each other.

“At what? Who is the greatest, at what?” we want to know.

Me? If I’d been Jesus, I might’ve said “Sure, y’all are REALLY great. Been with me, now (what?) a year or two. And you still only get about 1 out of 10 of my parables. That’s a great batting average, all right. Batting .100 as a group. So maybe one of you’s batting .135, yeah, that’s really great!”

But Jesus is more patient than I am. Jesus is patient for two, three years with that group. Jesus uses their argument about greatness as a teaching opportunity.

You heard me read it. Jesus assumes the teaching position. Sits down. Calls all his entourage into the main room of his home. “Everybody here? The twelve? The rest?”

We can imagine the scene: see the women looking in from the kitchen. Men sitting around on the floor, standing against the walls. Children peeking around their momma’s skirts.

“My dear students.” He always talked to them with affection when they weren’t out in public. “My dear students. You want to be great, you want to be first, in God’s Kingdom? Listen.

“Whoever wants to be first, must be last of all.”

“Whoever wants to be first, must be servant of all.”

Silence. No questions. No hands raised.

“OK. Watch. Pay attention.” As Rabbi Jesus acts out a parable for them.

He motions one of the children to come to him. Can’t you see the child trying to hide in its mother’s skirts, its mother bends down to whisper something, and the child comes forward.

The child steps up to Rabbi Jesus, sitting there, grownups saying not a word. Taking the child into his hug, Jesus says “Listen. Watch what I’m saying. Whoever welcomes such a child, in my name, welcomes me. And whoever welcomes me, welcomes not only me, but the (God) who sent me.”

Boing! A child? In those days, in that culture, children were loved in their own family, sure, but they were to keep quiet, keep out of sight, children were NOT welcome in gatherings of grownups, and certainly not welcome in the worship of God.

Welcome a child, as a surrogate for Jesus, as a surrogate for God?

Children? Everyone knows children are noisy and wiggly and messy and smelly and, when not supervised, not much more than feral animals. Children?

Remember, people, it's a parable. Parable acted out. The heart of this parable is NOT the child, but the WELCOME. That's the message. The welcome and the embrace.

Do you think they remembered this, and take it to heart? At least Mark remembered it, or heard about it, years later, when he picked this teaching to include in his Gospel.

You wanna be great? Watch and Learn, my dears ones, Watch and Learn.

God's interested in who is the greatest – yes – the Greatest in Welcoming. Welcoming those our outside society regards as insignificant, like a child, the least, in our villages.

---

Do you know about The List? Do you suppose anyone in Jesus' home that day, made the connection between the parable he'd just acted out, and The List?

Children, as a category, were on The List. Not just rabbis, but everyone knew about The List. And what categories of people were on it. The List:

Children. The mentally deranged. Women sick in bed. The emotionally unbalanced. Lepers – lepers were highly contagious! Paralyzed people. People with deformities. Crazy wild people. Women at their time of the month. Non-Jews (gentiles). Deaf and blind people. People with other birth defects. Slaughterhouse workers. Tannery workers. The List went on and on.

Everyone knew about The List. They'd never seen it written down, most couldn't read anyway. But everybody know the kinds of people who were on The List.

It was The List of kinds of people who were NOT WELCOME, not permitted to worship God, in the synagogues and temple, because they were unclean, impure, unworthy for worship considerations. No defective people, no sub-standard people, no diseased people, no foreigners allowed in worship.

If you even touched someone whose condition had them on The List, YOU became unclean, unworthy to be welcome in the worship of the Lord God. That's how it was, in Jesus' day.

And what had Jesus been doing, ever since he invited his first disciples to follow him, to watch and learn from what he did and said? What had he been doing for two years? Jesus has been "working The List."

Some of the disciples may have realized it but they never seemed to have talked about it - it was too dangerous, what he was doing - they didn't talk about it until he was dead and gone.

“Working The List.” Look and see yourself. Read through Mark and you’ll see it. I didn’t see it for years as a pastor, and it was there all the time. Scene after scene, Jesus is working The List.

Mark, chapter one. Jesus touches and heals a mentally deranged person, touches and welcomes a woman sick in bed, touches an emotionally unbalanced person, and, hear this!, even touches that most bizarre, deforming, contagious of all diseases – touches a leper! Yuk! Jesus is working The List of people who are unwelcome in worship, according to the religious officials of his day. Keeps going, in Mark. A paralyzed man, people with deformities, a crazy-wild-as-an-animal man (who lives in the burial tombs!), a woman (not just at her time of the month) but – a woman who had been hemorrhaging for 12 years, 12 years!

Touched them. Restored them, fit for worship. Welcomed them.

In our culture, we’d never keep a person out of worship because of birth defects, would we? But that was then. And, then, there was The List.

(Mark isn’t the only Gospel that portrays Jesus working The List. Luke does too, in both books)

They didn’t intend to be mean and cruel about it. That’s the way it was. Only the best, only the healthy creatures of God were worthy to worship the Lord, the One High God of Israel. It was a matter of worship quality. Quality control. Respect for God.

But Jesus. Jesus’ take on their scriptures, and the character of their God he encountered in their scriptures, led him to another conclusion, another interpretation. The List was wrong.

Jesus’ ministry of healing, restoration, was specifically focused upon touching and welcoming every single person, with every single human condition, especially those who were on The List.

Mark’s telling us those weren’t random encounters. He did good to whoever was hanging around each day – a sick man today, a sick woman tomorrow, channeling Ernest Ainsley with sawdust in his toes, hitting them in the forehead, saying “Heal !” No. Not that.

Jesus is restoring them, declaring them fit for worship, welcoming them into the presence of God, brothers and sisters in God’s family, regardless of how weird their deformity or how disgusting their disease. Person by person, Jesus is tearing up The List.

This is R-rated stuff. R-rated for the anger and violence he can expect from hundreds of rabbis and priests whose entire lives are devoted to enforcing The List.

“You wanna follow me, my dear friends? You gotta be great in welcoming each and every one, the unruly child, the deformed and the diseased, the disgustingly poor, those who are out-of-their-right-mind, those who are of a different race and class, you gotta welcome them all.

“And, if you follow me on this dangerous path, if you welcome everyone, everyone, I mean everyone, it will make some people mad at you, call you names, even threaten your life. Because, no matter what continent you live on, no matter what decade, some people will have their limits, some people will have Their List.”

---

I have to admit, the Church of Jesus Christ in our day and time does pretty well at welcoming, welcoming all, to worship and ministry. We see lots of churches, large and small, with wheelchair ramps. Yes, most people worship with their own economic and ethnic groups, but outsiders are often welcomed in, there's some variety in some churches.

Some of our children have lunchtime friends from the special ed class at school, a few. Decades ago, many of those kids would have been kept home, no classes for them. We're doing pretty good, I suppose. What do you think?

Still gotta work The List about other differences, though, don't we? People with different sexual orientations are on some lists. We see some signs that racial differences make a difference to some, who still have that on Their List. People from Arab countries, are they welcome, or are they on some Lists? I don't know. Maybe we've still got work to do ...

---

Can I tell you a story? Then I'm done. True story. We have three grown children. One of our sons moved to California when he graduated college, 15 years ago, settled in, put roots down. We enjoy visiting him there, he visits here. It's a long way, but the planes fly, and it's all good.

One of our first visits there years ago, he lives in a big city, Hunter took us to a church where he worships some. “Got to get there early, to get a seat,” he says. OK. Old downtown church. We climbed the outside steps. Big sanctuary. 20 minutes early. Got seats together. Some people speak to us. Settle in. Jazz trio plays 15 minute set as pews fill. Others line the walls, standing up. Every imaginable ethnic and national origin, like the city outside. Sanctuary is full of energy and expectation.

Somebody comes out, sits at grand piano, fills the room with music. Everyone sings. Fifty people file onto the pulpit stage, bright multi-color choir robes, singing, singing, singing.

I don't have time to tell you about the woman who described a mission trip, led us in prayer, nor the old man who preached, the young people who sang tears into my eyes ... no ...

What I want to tell you about is - when I went to the bathroom. Yes. After worship, I said to Hunter “That was WONDERFUL! Like the Montreat Youth Conference for adults! Wonderful! Before we go outside and go home, where's the Men's Room?”

“OK Dad. Through that door. Down the stairs. Down the hall. Got it?”

Through the door, down the stairs, down the hall. I look in the basement fellowship hall, you know how old churches have the fellowship hall under the sanctuary, in that huge room are over 200 people, sitting at tables, eating dinner.

In the men’s room, to the guy at the next sink, I say “My first time here. Wonderful worship. Do you have dinner here every Sunday after worship, or is this a special event?”

Guy laughs in a friendly way, says “Welcome, mister. We get lots of visitors. Hope you’ll come again. And no, most of us in there, eating dinner, weren’t in worship upstairs, but this is our church. You see, we’re all homeless and this is where we eat dinner, every day of the week.”

Out in the street, sliding into our rental car, I say to Betts, I say “If you thought worship was inspiring Upstairs, wait till I tell you what’s going on DOWNstairs in that church!”

---

On the flight back to Charlotte, I had a dream. I dreamed the church where I was pastor, in Fort Mill, would one day have that kind of welcome to people, to rich and poor, to the clean and the nasty, to the healthy and the sick. That our church would have that kind of Open Doors, Open Hearts, Open Arms, for ALL the people God loves.

---

Let me ask you.

Could YOU ever imagine being part of a church with THAT kind of welcome?

Could you ever imagine that?

Rev Art Gatewood  
Interim Associate Pastor  
Oakland Avenue Presbyterian Church  
Rock Hill SC

Mark 9:33-39  
Open Doors, Open Heart, Open Arms  
September 20, 2009