

Worship for September 19, 2021

Prelude

Welcome and Announcements

*Call to Worship

To your name, O Lord,
help us to bow the knee and all its worshiping,
bow the head in all its thinking,
bow the will and all its choosing,
bow the heart and all its loving. Amen.

*Hymn 31 Let Us With a Gladsome Mind

Prayer

**God and Father of all,
you have willed that the last be first and you have made a little child the measure of your kingdom.**

We may be reluctant to embrace humility and service, for to do so may imply work and will require a spirit of cooperation and compromise.

**Give us the wisdom which is from above,
so we may understand, that, in your sight, the one who serves is the greatest of all.**

**We ask this through our Lord Jesus Christ,
Whose service gives us life and hope. Amen.**

Hymn 698 Take, O Take Me As I Am

Assurance of Grace

God's Word is truth: That Jesus Christ came into the world to redeem and re-form our lives.

The old life is gone and a new life has begun.

Your sins are forgiven.

Be at peace with God, one another, and yourselves. Amen.

First Reading

Time With Our Young Disciples

Gospel Reading Mark 9:30-37

Morning Message

We Americans love our sports. And right now its football time. Friday night lights, Game Day Saturday, Football Sunday Night, (And afternoon), Monday Night Football, and my personal favorite...Monday Night Football on Thursday nights.

Travel a wee bit up the road to the high school, and it gets even better for sports fans: football, soccer, volleyball, Cross Country, and cheerleading are all in full motion. I don't know what season heralds the arrival of swimming and archery. Maybe one of you can enlighten me.

As I was thinking about all these exhibitions of human strength and discipline and beauty, and, let's face it, youth, I began to see them not as individual sports. Instead, I began to see more clearly what they all have in common: competition. It seems to me, it's the thrill, the potentiality present in competition, in contest, that energizes these games, matches, and meets. Who wins and who loses and all the drama leading up to the final moments.

We all want to be on the winning side of the field. We all want to feel the excitement, if only in our dreams, of an Emma Raducanu raising that Silver trophy up for the cheering crowd at last week's US Open finals.

Maybe we don't have to be taught to compete. It just unfurls from somewhere in our nature. Awhile back, we met our daughter and son-in-law and grandson at a particular store at the mall. Ed and I parked and walked to the entrance to wait on the others. They were right behind us. We heard a car door slam with a little more force than necessary and the next thing we knew, our three year old grandson stomps up to his grandfather and announces, "I'm so angry with you, PaPaw. You beat us."

Well, of course, we did the wrong thing and laughed, which made him madder. Reconciliation came by way of a big toy shark tucked under Tad's arm as he and his granddad walked through the store.

In our text, we find the disciples jockeying for position. Position is another word for power. A hierarchy of power helps us organize civilization and all its sub-sets. Think about the many ways we experience this daily. Where we work, where we shop, how we do our banking, our tv viewing. All of these things come to us through some system of production and delivery. Someone has to be the decider. There are a lot of deciders in our life.

I was sharing this with Robin's dad last week. Robin told him I knew his nephew. And indeed, we were high school classmates and we both worked at the other drug store on Route 60. Mike was higher up the ladder. He got more hours and maybe a few cents per hour than I did. Why? Because he made the home deliveries. Being the delivery boy was a sought after position and when there was a vacancy it was a big deal. Competition exists everywhere.

In our text, the disciples are just having a conversation. It may not have been academic, so much as just "shooting the breeze." But, Jesus hears them and it is what he does next that tells us the most about who Jesus is in this setting.

What Jesus doesn't do is settle the argument. Nor does he placate all of them, saying, "Now, now, you're ALL my favorite."

No. Jesus bends down and picks up a little child, maybe a child of one of the disciples' own. And he says, "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me."

Children occupied an interesting place in the first century household for Jews and Romans alike. They represented the future, carrying on the family name, providing for their aging parents, and producing the next generation.

But, in the present, they were a liability. They were one more mouth to feed. The younger the child, the more likely they were to become sick and die.

They participated in household labor, but weren't all that productive. Many historians believe that children were on about an equal status with a slave. They had no power. And there was no CPS or school system to report cases of abuse or neglect.

And Jesus said we must welcome people such as these powerless, vulnerable, defenseless children. Once again, Jesus turns our expectations upside down. It is a great reversal in the name of justice. The adult conversation is about power and position. Jesus transforms it into a lesson on welcome.

There are four babies about to be born in my extended family over the next few months. They will be celebrated, wrapped in the softest blankets and cutest sleepers. Their care will be the subject of many a conversation. You know the drill: how will this child be fed? Will Mom or Dad go back to work? How soon?

Before long, they will be vaccinated and educated and enrolled in piano lessons and signed up for one of those great American icons of competition...T-ball. And it is a good thing. A good and full life with parents who love and guide and discipline and protect.

Protection that far too many children will never experience, which is a tragedy.

This week I heard a book review that was absolutely shocking. The author is Rachel Denhollander, and the book is about the abuse she suffered as a young gymnast. *What Is a Girl Worth?* That's the title and it's relevant to our scripture text today. That's what it comes down to, the question behind the question: how much is a child, boy or girl, worth?

The US Senate held a hearing this week at which at least four elite US gymnasts testified. These are athletes that we've seen and cheered for when they represented the country at the Olympics. They all testified to the hideous abuse they endured by their team doctor. They told their parents, they complained, some of them not even old or experienced enough to know what was happening to them. The complaints went nowhere. Investigations were cursory, if they were conducted at all. The girls were silenced, ridiculed, their abuse diminished.

The result was disastrous. The abuser had unfettered contact with dozens of young children before he was stopped. This was a sick power system that de-valued children, little girls in this case. Even as adults, the young women who testified described the lasting effects of the physical and psychological violence done to them. They are now seeking justice from a justice system that was woefully broken.

Who is the greatest? Well, greatness, in Jesus' economy, or his power structure, doesn't come from competitions won on the field or in the classroom or boardroom. Greatness is wrapped up in humility. Like those swaddling clothes in which Mary wrapped Jesus.

Greatness recognizes who the vulnerable are. Greatness points the way to hope. Greatness rises up with courage and compassion to defend the weak. Greatness calls us to look out for the welfare of those who can least affect their own welfare. In this text, it is children, but, it could be anyone, even elite, privileged, and celebrated gymnasts. Power can be used for evil when it seeks to dominate, humiliate, and demean.

So, we look for the right use of power. Like sharing who controls the remote control on Sundays.

How we wish all contests could be settled so simply.

So, I hope you enjoy the smaorgasbord of sport this week. Cheer for your teams. May the best ones win.

But, remember competition has no place in the kingdom of God.

In the early churches of Paul's day, there were some mighty power struggles. He wrote to them, advising them with these wise words:

Love one another with brotherly, sisterly, affection.

Live in harmony with one another.

Do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly. Never be wise in your own sight.

May the God of endurance and encouragement grant you to live in such harmony with one another, in accord with Jesus Christ, that together you may with one voice glorify the God and

Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, welcome one another as Christ welcomed you, for the glory of God.

Finally, aim for restoration, comfort one another, agree with one another, live in peace and the God of love and peace will be with you.

May it be so for all of you. Amen.

*Hymn 727 Will You Let Me Be Your Servant Verses 1-3

*Affirmation of Faith The Apostles' Creed p. 35

Sharing Our Joys and Concerns

Pastoral Prayer and the Lord's Prayer

Presenting Our Tithes and Offerings

Prayer of Dedication

We give with gratitude for all our God has given us. In the upside down world of the Gospel, we measure our wealth not by what we have but by what we can give away. Lord, God, receive our offerings today to bless your church, your creation, and your children, wherever there is need. Amen.

*Hymn 727 Will You Let Me Be Your Servant Verses 4-6

*Blessing

*Postlude