

Mark 9: 30 – 37 A Paradox in Our Faith
Newtonbrook United Church – September 20, 2009

Have you ever considered that our Christian faith – to follow in the way of Jesus – is to live a life of paradox? That is to say that living the way Jesus taught is to live a life that has a set of values that seem to be absurd to others; or simply not logical?

I am going to suggest this morning that living the values that Jesus teaches us are both paradoxical, and rewarding.

First of all, I suspect that many of us who are here this morning are familiar with this story that happened when Jesus took a child in his arms, and said;

"whoever receives one such child in my name receives me; and whoever receives me, receives not me but the One who sent me."¹

Biblical scholars refer to this as an acted-out parable. It is an attempt by Jesus to illustrate the paradox that he had just proclaimed:

"If any one would be first, he (sic) must be last of all and servant of all."²

As I said, I suspect that you've heard many sermons on the topic of the priority of children, or those who are marginalized. These sermons usually contrast putting children first with what is actually happening in God's world. Those sermons have told me that children were not valued in the society where Jesus lived – children were the first victims of disease, famine, or war.

Let's review the facts from 2000 years later:

from PowerPoint slides

On November 24, 1989 the Parliament of Canada agreed to eliminate child poverty in this country by the year 2000;

BUT

- According to Campaign 2000:
- Canada's after-tax child poverty rate appears stalled at 11.3 per cent;
- Nearly one out every nine Canadian children lives in poverty;
- A startling 40 per cent of low-income children live in families where at least one of their parents works full-time year round – they're the working poor

In 2007 there were 112 million underweight children worldwide:

9 million died before the age of five.

¹ Mark 9:37

² Mark 9:35

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UNICEF reports that 1 billion children are deprived of nutrition, water, sanitation, health, education, or information = 50% of children worldwide.

Jesus 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

I suspect that Jesus took a child in his arms because children were overlooked, even though they too are a part of God’s family. Yes – we too overlook children, as those statistics show. The Daily Bread Food Bank here in Toronto has stats that show that 35% of their clients are children³. If all of us really are a part of God’s family, those are not someone else’s kids in the statistics – they are our children; and our grandchildren.

In the world of God’s dreams, every child, every person, is loved and has enough to eat. Those are the values that Jesus was teaching by taking a child into his arms.

Another of the values that Jesus was teaching was about sharing our gifts. Service to others, Jesus says, brings greatness.

In the world of God’s dreams greatness comes, not from a red carpet appearance at the Toronto international Film Festival – **TIFF**. Greatness comes from cleaning plates that others have used at the Wednesday Drop Inn at Newtonbrook; or from preparing the food in the kitchen; or from sitting down and hearing the stories of our guests, or from cleaning the pollution of prosperity from the sidewalks of Willowdale of. A paradox!

One commentator on the scriptures says that:

“Jesus does not despise the desire to be first, but his definition of greatness stands the world’s ordering of priorities on its head and radically challenges a fundamental human assumption about achievement.”⁴

Following Jesus means having values that are upside right in an upside down world.

Jesus concluded by saying that anyone who welcomes a child, welcomes Jesus, and not only Jesus, but the One who sent him. The welcoming of a child enacts – remember Jesus put his arms around a child – this act demonstrates that children were welcome in the community of disciples following Jesus on the

³ Daily Bread report, “Who’s Hungry”, 2009

⁴ L. Williamson Jr., Mark, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching, p. 170

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way to the Kingdom of God. Jesus welcomed those who were overlooked.
Another paradox!

Who, or what, do we frequently overlook in our society today?

Have you ever thought that we overlook the abundance of life that our children and grandchildren may have had through our neglect and disregard of God's earth?

The town of Raleigh is just outside the Burnt Cape Ecological Reserve near the northern tip of Newfoundland. When Shari & I toured this example of tundra vegetation this past summer, our guide cautioned us to be careful where we walked because we could crush the life out of a plant clinging to life on a rocky, limestone outcrop. How careful are we when we walk, or take a boat out on the waters of our baptism? Are we conscious of the life beneath our feet, or in the air that surrounds us?

This society calls us "consumers", and it treats the earth as something to be "consumed."

Our faith calls us to be stewards of the earth, and to live with respect as a part of creation – using as little as possible. We do that here at Newtonbrook, for example, by attempting to reduce our use of paper. Since we now have access to new technology in worship, it is possible for us to do away with the use of paper for our Orders of service and announcements. In worship we sing a hymn called, Touch the Earth Gently, and the elimination of paper on Sunday morning is not only possible, it may be the environmentally responsible pathway. We have the ability to stop being consumers of reams of paper. The choice is ours and it will affect the future for our children and grandchildren.

The Administration Committee is investigating the replacement of the fluorescent lighting in the building with more efficient lighting. Most of us have done similar upgrades in our homes to reduce our carbon footprint. That has been easy to do.

We now have to face the paradox that in order for our children and grandchildren to have a fuller life, we need to make big decisions on how we live. George Monbiot, author of "Heat", and columnist in The Guardian, would recommend that we stop virtually all airline travel because of its effect on global warming. Are middle class folk ready to make that sacrifice for the future? That's just one small example.

In 1975 a rock music group called **Supertramp** released an album called, "Crisis? What Crisis?" The cover of the album is a picture of paradox. It shows a man relaxing in a beach chair with a drink. He is sitting underneath an umbrella, a scene that might come from a patio, or poolside. The irony of the

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title is shown in the surroundings – a garbage dump surrounded by belching smokestacks. Is that a picture that we can imagine happening in our world 35 years later?

Some still live in denial of the fact that the ecosystems of the earth are in crisis. There are two forms of this denial: one says that it is just hype by the tree-huggers of the world. The other form of denial is despair – it says that there's nothing that we can do anyway, so there's no use trying.

Our faith tradition is full of the stories of Esther, David, Moses, Deborah and others who trusted in God and took action when others were living lives in denial. Jesus told a story of a rich young man who wanted the fullness of life that Jesus promised, but rejected it because he would have had to give up his affluent lifestyle.

As Christians, we follow in the Way of Jesus who taught that God wants us to have life in all of its abundance! Part of that abundance is in the belief that **all of life is important to God** – and Jesus demonstrated that fact by taking into his arms a small child who would have been worthless in the economy of the Roman Empire. It is a paradox.

In 2007 Michael Northcott published a book on the ethics of global warming⁵. In his preface he writes these words that are a profound challenge to those who believe in the status quo, or who support the systems of Empire:

"I completed this manuscript in the week in which the world celebrated the 200th anniversary of the abolition of slavery. This is a propitious moment to finish a book on global warming. The industrial revolution began by enslaving human beings to its imperatives, expropriating their common lands and wealth and enslaving their labour power and then even their bodies as tradeable chattels. Industrialism is now enslaving the climate of the planet to the same imperatives of market values and property accumulation. And the international agreements so far constructed to resolve this crisis are turning the climate, and carbon dioxide, into traded chattels through carbon trades and offsets. What empowered many individuals around the world in the struggle against the evils of slavery and the injustices of early industrialism was a spiritual vision of divine grace. Only such a vision can save the present generation from subjecting the peoples and species of the earth to a future of dangerous climate change."

We dream of a future of abundant life for our children; our grandchildren, and all of the creatures of God's earth. It is by God's grace that we have life – life to be shared today, tomorrow, and God only knows how far into the future. The way of Jesus has values that, to this world, seem to be a paradox.

⁵Michael, S. Northcott, A Moral Climate: the ethics of global warming, Orbis Books

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Honouring the least of God's children and being a servant of all is the pathway to greatness. By honouring what some might refer to as the least of these, we welcome Jesus, and anyone who welcomes Jesus, welcomes God into their life. It is a paradox to those who are committed to the values of Empire!

V.U. # 583 – Jesus Came, a Child Like Me

Questions for reflection:

What paradoxes are apparent to you in Mark 9: 30 – 37?

How are these paradoxical teachings lived out in your faith community? Your life?

How might people in our wider society be better brought into an experience of community, rather than "Bowling alone".

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Prayers for God's Family and Creation:

God of love and goodness;

We come here this morning to worship you, and to find hope and encouragement as we attempt to live the way of Jesus; the way of love in your world. We pray that you will hear the prayers of our hearts, and that we will be open to hearing the prayers that you have for us.

This is the final Sunday morning of summer. As we take this circuit around the sun, the season is changing, a part of your design for life on your earth. Help us, Creator God, the One who has created and is creating, to accept, and to grow through the changing seasons of our lives.

Loving God, this morning our hearts go out to those who teach, and their students;

those who heal, and those who need healing;

those who are children, and their parents;

to those who are advocates for justice, and those who are in positions of power;

for those who offer themselves in service to others without even trying;

and for those who share the dream of a better world for our children and grandchildren, and who speak it into being.

Ever-present God, we pray for your world, for its healing and growing in the ways of love. Our love in our prayers goes out this morning to:

Betty Robinson, in hospital after a fall this week; to all those who are unemployed and seeking meaningful work; and to all those whose names are written on our hearts.

Eternal God, we pray as a community of your people. **Amen**