

“The Hardest Word in the Bible”
Mark 9:33-37
World Communion Sunday

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Westminster, Greenville
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Back when I was in high school, the Irish rock band U2 came out with their bestselling, critically acclaimed album, *The Joshua Tree*.

As some of you may recall, the first song of that album was one of the reasons that it became such a hit. The song is entitled “Where the Streets Have No Name,” and the first verse went like this:

**I want to run
I want to hide
I want to tear down the walls
That hold me inside
I want to reach out
And touch the flame
Where the streets have no name**

I always loved the way that song began, both the music and the lyrics—but for the life of me, I could never figure out what the heck the band was talking about.

Run to where? Hide because of what?
What walls are holding them inside?
And where in the world are “the streets [that] have no name”?

It wasn’t until many years later that I read an interview with the lead singer Bono, in which he explained the thought behind the song. He talked about his experience as a child growing up in a very divided country in Ireland:

“I was trying to sketch a location,
maybe a spiritual location,
I was trying to sketch a feeling,” Bono said.

**“I often have the feeling of wanting to go somewhere
where the values of our society don’t hold you down.**

**“In Belfast, by what street somebody lives on--
 --you can tell not only their religion,
 but tell how much money they're making—
 --literally by which side of the road they live on...**

**...that said something to me,
 and so I started writing about a place
 where the streets have no name...”¹**

In other words, Bono was imagining a place where people were not making DISTINCTIONS among one another... no distinctions over money or over religion or over status...

Now Bono did NOT say that a particular passage of scripture guided him in creating this song...but if he were to choose one, our passage from Mark this morning would seem to fit the bill.

“...and when he was in the house he asked them, “What were you arguing about on the way?” But they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another who was the greatest.”

Who was the greatest...the disciples are making distinctions, right? They're comparing their status, their achievements...and this is NOT the kind of thing that followers of Jesus ought to do.

Be humble and keep your accomplishments to yourself.
 Don't elbow each other trying to be number one.
 That's what Jesus says today, right?

No more selfish ambition.
 Go love and serve your neighbor.
 Stop making your needs number one. Amen.

Not a bad sermon to hear, not a bad sermon to preach.

¹ I am indebted to multiple sources for Bono's explanation of the lyrics to this song, including a sermon by the Rev. Mark Ramsey, "Except...", preached on June 9, 2011 at the Montreat Conference Center in North Carolina, and the Wikipedia website, www.wikipedia.org.

Funny thing is...I'm not convinced that's the sermon Jesus preached.

Look again at what happens.

Jesus asks the disciples what they argued about...and they were silent.

Why the silence? You know why.

They were embarrassed. They were ashamed.

They knew they ought not to be jockeying for position.

And that's just it.

Before Jesus does ANY teaching in this text, the disciples already KNOW that what they were doing was wrong.

Selfish ambition? Trying to be number one?

They didn't need Jesus to tell them they were out of line.

Do you and I REALLY need Jesus to tell us that there's no place for that kind of behavior in the household of God?

Look, I like sermons that say "Don't put yourself first. Go serve somebody this week." There's nothing wrong with that sermon. Jesus would like that sermon.

But I think he preached a different sermon in our text.

What's fascinating is what Jesus says AFTER the disciples are silent, after they know they've done something wrong. In my mind, Jesus says something much more expansive, much more penetrating, much more DISTURBING:

Jesus says:

"Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all."

- I wish Jesus had said, "Whoever wants to be first must serve some people and come after some people."

But Jesus didn't say some. He said ALL.

- See, what I really wish Jesus had said was "stop promoting yourself and go serve somebody." Because I can do that. I can put my agenda aside for a day, and go find someone whom I'd like to serve.

But Jesus didn't say "somebody." Jesus said ALL.

Now I don't know about you, but that's where the rubber hits the road for me. There are always going to be people in my life who I'm willing to serve. But there are also people that I'd prefer NOT to serve.

People I'd prefer to ignore, to find fault with...people that really get my goat.

*"Whoever wants to be first must be last **of all** and servant **of all**."??!!*

It's a well-trod text, a familiar text, and I'm used to emphasizing the SERVICE part.

But what if Jesus was emphasizing the ALL part?

All is our sermon series word today.

We are in the midst of our sermon series, entitled "Words of Faith,"
and our word for this morning is "all".

All. All. Servant of all. Last of all.
Have you ever noticed how slippery that word is?

All is one of those exaggeration words.
We say all, but we don't really MEAN all...we mean most.
We mean the great majority. But not all...

My first year out of college, I worked for the Jesuit Volunteer Corps. As the name indicates, it's an organization of the Roman Catholic Church, so I attended Catholic mass each week. Which meant communion was offered every single week, which presented me with something of an issue.

I had been taught that only Catholics are supposed to partake of a Catholic Eucharist. But during that year, for better or worse, I ignored this rule.

I took communion each Sunday, and to the priests' credit, I was never questioned or turned away. No matter what the official doctrine was or is in the Catholic Church, the priests understood...church is the place where you don't leave people out.

That's what ALL means.

And yet, in telling you this, I fell into the trap. I said I went to church every week when I was with the Jesuit Volunteer Corps.

Really, Ben?
Each week? Every week?
You never missed church once?

Well, maybe once...yeah, even more than once...
but if I missed it just once, it wasn't ALL.

Do you see the problem?

"All" looks like an innocuous word. A harmless word. But it's a loaded word. It's a problematic word. Sometimes, it's a dangerous word.

The theologian Miroslav Volf is a professor who teaches at Yale. Volf has a colleague, another professor named Carlos.

Carlos' family is from Cuba, and one day—this was years ago,
when Fidel Castro was still alive and in charge of Cuba—
Carlos was visiting his mother in Chicago,
some Cuban friends of the family were there.

So they started a friendly theological inquiry.

"Listen, Carlos," said one of the friends. "I was thinking...If by some miracle Fidel [Castro] turned to God in repentance before he died, would he go to heaven?"

Carlos, the theologian who teaches at Yale, said:
"God's grace is for all people, dictators included!"

The woman who asked the question was NOT impressed with Carlos' credentials. She thought, and she thought, and she said:

“If Fidel gets to heaven, then I don't want to be there!”²

There's something in us that RESISTS the word *all*...

“All” levels the playing field.

“All” reshuffles the deck.

“All” gets rid of those important social distinctions that you and I like to make among people.

And Jesus knows this.

Jesus knows this, which is why he holds up a child for his disciples.

As one scholar writes:

“It is difficult...for us to conceive how weak, vulnerable, and lowly children were in Jesus' day.”

First-century Palestinian parents loved their children, of course—but “the odds were overwhelming that a child would not live to adulthood”. By some estimates, 30% of infants died in childbirth, and another 30% were gone by age 6.

This meant that “society was reluctant to place much value on childhood,” and that in terms of status, a child was “the social equal of a slave.”³

In other words, Jesus picks up a child, a worthless child,
and says, in effect, I really mean ALL.

When you welcome a child, you welcome me.
When you welcome someone you deem as worthless,
someone you'd rather ignore,
THAT'S when you're with me.

² Miroslav Volf, *Free of Charge: Giving and Forgiving in a Culture Stripped of Grace*, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005.

³ Thomas G. Long, *Matthew*, Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997.

Is anybody else here wishing Jesus had said “some”?

Because right now, I’m not thinking of children...
 but I sure can think of people I’ve known in my life—
 people I chose to ignore.

I can think of folks that have pressed my buttons, and I haven’t been MEAN to them. But I certainly didn’t set about trying to SERVE them. I did not put THEM first and me last in the little hierarchies of my mind.

You see, what I wish Jesus had said was this:

“Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all, except for that person who just posted that political diatribe on Facebook the other day that really made your blood boil over...you don’t have to be servant to that person. Everyone else, but not that idiot.”

That’s what I wish Jesus had said.
 But Jesus said “all”.
 Why did he have to say “all”?

Let me invite you to do something right now.
 In your mind’s eye, I want you to imagine someone in your life right now, someone you know, who’s keeping you from embracing this word...ALL.

Peter Storey was the former Bishop
 of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa
 and President of the South African Council of Churches.

Storey writes:

“One of our important tasks in South Africa’s long struggle for liberation was to help people imagine what they found unimaginable:

a South Africa where black and white lived together,
 hand in hand and at peace.

“It was crucial for the church to incarnate that dream
in the life of the Christian community
so we could say to an unwilling nation,

*“There! That is what we mean
when we talk about God’s future for South Africa!
That is the new South Africa!”*

He then tells this story:

I once received a phone call in the early hours of the morning
telling me that one of my black clergy in a very racist town
had been arrested by the secret police.

I got up, picked up another minister, and drove to the prison.
We arrived, and demanded to see our friend.

We were accompanied by a large white Afrikaner guard
to a little room where we found Ike Moloabi
sitting on a bench wearing a sweatsuit
and looking quite terrified.

Ike had been pulled out of bed in the early hours of a freezing winter
morning and dragged off like that.

I said to the guard, ***“We are going to have Communion,”***
and I took out of my pocket a little chalice
and a tiny little bottle of Communion wine
and some bread.

I spread my pocket handkerchief on the bench between us
and made the table ready,
and we began the Liturgy.

When it was time to give the Invitation, I said to the guard,
***“This table is open to all,
so if you would like to share with us,
please feel free to do so.”***

This must have touched some place in his religious self,
 because he took the line of least resistance
 and nodded rather curtly.

I consecrated the bread and the wine, and noticed that Ike was beginning to
 come to life a little. He could see what was happening here.

Then I handed the bread and the cup to Ike...and Ike ate and drank.

[Then] I offered bread and the cup to the guard.

You don't need to know too much about South Africa to understand what
 white Afrikaner racists felt about letting their lips touch a cup from which a black
 person had just drunk.

The guard was in crisis:
 he would either have to overcome his prejudice
 OR refuse the means of grace.

After a long pause,
 he took the cup and sipped from it,
 and for the first time I saw a glimmer of a smile on Ike's face.

Then I took something of a liberty with the truth and said,
*"In the Methodist liturgy,
 we always hold hands when we say the grace..."*

...and very stiffly, the ward reached out his hand
 and took Ike's, and there we were in a little circle, holding hands,
 while I said the ancient words of benediction:

*"The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ,
 the love of God
 and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with us all."*⁴

⁴ I am indebted to both the Rev. Amy Starr Redwine and the Rev. Mark Ramsey for pointing me to this story. It comes from Peter Storey's article "Table Manners for Peacebuilders" in *Conflict and Communion*, pp.61-62.

Now...that person I asked you to think about...
the one whom you wish was NOT a part of "all"...
do you still have that person in mind?

What do you think would happen if you decided that you are going to leave
this sanctuary today and reach out to that person?

Do you think that the grace of Christ and the love of God and the fellowship
of the Holy Spirit would travel with you, and go with you even to that person?

Even to all?

As best as I can tell, there's only one way to find out.

Amen.