

Stoop! GOSPEL: Mark 9:30–37

Jesus and the disciples went on] and passed through Galilee. He did not want anyone to know it; ³¹for he was teaching his disciples, saying to them, "The Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him, and three days after being killed, he will rise again." ³²But they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him. ³³Then they came to Capernaum; and when he was in the house he asked them, "What were you arguing about on the way?" ³⁴But they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another who was the greatest. ³⁵He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all." ³⁶Then he took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms, he said to them, ³⁷Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me."

"It's a beautiful day in this neighborhood, a beautiful day for a neighbor, would you be mine, could you be mine?" Do you recognize this theme song? Who does it belong to? Mr. Rogers, the late Fred Rogers, whose television neighborhood welcomed two generations of American children (some of you, I imagine). You may not know this, but Fred Rogers was actually also a Presbyterian minister, and his demeanor and the lessons he taught, were inspired by his faith, his convictions about how we live in neighborly ways TOGETHER.

He often said that he went into television because he hated it so, and thought there must be some positive way to use this incredible tool. So for decades, he taught children to love themselves, to love others. I've read that, when in a crowd, he always engaged with the children first--**stooping** down to their level, before he ever talked to the adults. He was one of those people who understood how the world is a very different place when you are "low" in it, whether physically or socially or economically.

Think for a minute...have you ever seen a child lost in a crowd? Have you seen pictures of people devastated after a natural disaster? Have you ever been somewhere where you don't speak the language and you're desperate to communicate but not matter how smart you may be, people look at you like you are stupid? Have you ever stood in line, either yourself or with someone to apply for unemployment, to receive food or food stamps?

These are sort of "stooping" experiences; moments when the world we thought we knew and the things we thought were important—shift, change somehow. I don't know, but think Jesus' disciples in our gospel this evening were standing **tall** in a way—all caught up in deciding who was going to be seated in the place of highest honor at some

sort of heavenly banquet, jockeying for whose title was going to reflect best how respected they were in their faith community.

We know the routine: from academia to corporate America, even sometimes right here in the church, our egos can get the best of us. Pride is not necessarily a bad thing, but an over-inflated ego does little good for it's owner, nor anyone around them. It is true for us and it was true for Jesus' disciples.

So Jesus sits them down, and in his typical, down-to-earth, meet-us-right-where-we-are kind of way, Jesus shows them how to **stoop**, all the way to the ground, low enough to be at the level of a small child, a person so invisible in that world that the disciples maybe hadn't even noticed she was there.

The Greek word in the next doesn't indicate *gender*, but I like to think it was a little girl he picked up, because girls would have been even more invisible at the time, than boys. In ancient Palestine, children were the lowest class of citizens—the property of their parents with no rights of their own. We think little of Jesus picking up a child— noticing her—but this gesture was not lost on his disciples. And then what he does next is even more shocking. HE lifts her UP, not to get her out of the way, but to put her in the center of the whole conversation. “The one who welcomes one such as this,” he says, “welcomes me, AND welcomes the one who sent me.”

At another time Jesus tells the disciples they need to be like children, equally shocking, but here he says they need to be the servants of children. I wonder what Jesus would say our society—even as we tend to value our children, what about those who serve them?

If money means anything, they are often the lowest paid workers: daycare providers, pre-school teachers, nannies, foster parents. Even though children have a different place in our society, we still seem to value those who serve our children less than, I don't know, professional football players, for example. My apologies if there are any from NFL here tonight...I am glad you are using your God-given gifts, really, but my point is: that our culture tends to put stock in the kind of things that entertain, but don't really nurture. We put stock in things that excite, but don't often have lasting value.

And don't we ALL, in this culture of ours, struggle along in a rat race of sorts, trying to “keep up,” to impress others, to make something of ourselves...but as William Sloane Coffin puts it, "Even if you win the rat race, you're still a rat." It doesn't get much more brutal than that!

So maybe Jesus is just suggesting to us that the richest kind of life often comes through the ways we step out of that race. **Maybe**, Jesus is just reminding his disciples then and now, that the means through which we get to wherever we are going, are more important than whether or not we ever arrive.

One of my good friends—Peter—has a story told about him often, I know his family well, and they like to remind him about a time when he was 3 or 4—his father, a pastor, on a particular Sunday was hosting the bishop of the ELCA.

Following worship, Bishop Chilstrom stood at the door and greeted a long line of people leaving the sanctuary. Peter moved forward through the line with his dad, who was helping him think about how he might greet the bishop. Peter settled on “Nice to meet you Bishop Chilstrom, I’m Peter.” They had time to practice his greeting many times over. But when Peter reached the tall man at the door, instead he said this: “Bishop Chilstrom, will you tie my shoe?”

Peter’s father was both amused and a little embarrassed! But without a blink, Bishop Chilstrom stooped right down just as he was asked.

When we enter these doors, we all stand as God’s beloved. As we leave, we remain the same, no matter what the world might say, no matter who notices us, or who doesn’t. But with that promise, also comes a command: to go and do likewise; to take notice of those who are harder to see out there; to stoop, and try, for a minute to see the world through their eyes. Then comes less judgment, more understanding; less fighting, more sharing in common; less blame, more grace.

Who are the “least of these,” another gospel writer puts it...to them we are called to be servants, to be friends, to be neighbors.

Or as Mr. Rogers would say,
 ... let's make the most of this beautiful day,
 Since we're together, we might as well say,
 Please won't you be my neighbor?

Go be good neighbors and good stoopers. Amen.