

HINDRANCES
Mark 9:33 – 10:16
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First Mennonite Church
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The more famous and powerful the person, the harder it is to get access to that person. The more bodyguards they employ to keep strangers at bay and the more assistants to screen their calls. The less likely they are to entertain casual encounters. Metal detectors and barricades and armored limos and dark sunglasses signal that a celebrity or power broker has arrived and that we are to keep our distance!

If you are into fame and power, then you want to be one of the privileged few who are allowed up close. You would probably relish serving as a gatekeeper, maybe a bodyguard or personal assistant, making sure that only the pre-screened have access. After all, the more barriers there are, the more important you are by association!

Jesus deconstructs this approach, in fact, turns it on its head. Jesus doesn't call disciples to enhance his image or to be gatekeepers or to satisfy a desire for attention (theirs or his). Jesus calls them rather to "fish for people" (Mark 1:17). When he appoints the twelve, they are "to be with him, and to be sent out to proclaim the message, and to have the authority to cast out demons" (3:14). This is expansive, liberating work, to be carried out in tune with God's purposes. It requires frequent interactions with strangers, personal vulnerability, and dependency upon others' hospitality (6:7-13). It requires self-denial (7:34). It requires faith and prayer (9:29).

Jesus equips the disciples by having them observe his public teaching of the crowds and his verbal sparring with the Pharisees and then engaging them in more in-depth instruction in private. But the disciples struggle; they don't understand, they backslide, they succumb to worldly temptations. They want glory-by-association (though not guilt-by-association, as we see when they desert Jesus after his arrest). Sometimes they seem downright hopeless! The Gospel of Mark in particular shows us a flawed band of followers. This no doubt represents a slice of the good news; they didn't "get it right" 2,000 years ago and we don't either!

In today's passage (which spans three Sundays of lectionary preaching and could be approached from many different angles), the disciples are doing a poor job of holding together the revelation of Jesus as Messiah and the egalitarian, open-door character of God's Kingdom. Jesus has to keep repeating and reframing key aspects of his message and even so, there is little comprehension. In verses 30-32, Jesus' announcement that he will be betrayed and killed and rise again after three days, confuses the disciples but they are "afraid to ask him" to explain. Instead, they retreat into ego-talk as they traverse the Galilean countryside. When they arrive back at home base in Capernaum, Jesus asks them what they have been "arguing about on the way" (9:33). Their response to Jesus' penetrating question is "deafening silence" (*The Message*). The gospel writer supplies the answer, repeating the verb "argue"—"on the way they had argued with one another who was the greatest" (9:34).

Uh-ooh! "The greatest"! Being the greatest entails competition, hierarchy, status. It suggests an "in" group and an "out" group. It spawns dissension and threatens unity. It suggests a preoccupation with "human things" as opposed to "divine things" (8:33). It flies in the face of Jesus' careful teaching.

Of course, Jesus doesn't give up on them. He sits down (9:35), thus assuming the formal posture of teacher, and patiently reframes the lesson, using a surprising illustration. He places a child in the middle

of the disciples and embraces the child. We don't know whether this is a boy or a girl. While hugging the child, Jesus says to the disciples, "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me" (9:37). The verb translated "welcome" is a term of hospitality used about receiving guests in one's home. In offering welcome, hosts humble themselves and focus on the needs of their guests. In this cultural context, however, honoring a child with such hospitality is a shocking reversal of social expectations.

Judith Gundry-Volf explains, "In a Greco-Roman milieu, children were the least-valued members of society; they were considered not yet fully human [and] . . . had no legal rights. A father had the right brutally to punish, sell, pawn, expose, and even kill his own child. Newborns could be exposed—abandoned in a public place—where they would generally either die or be picked up by strangers and raise for profit as slaves, prostitutes, or beggars. Baby girls were especially vulnerable to this fate."¹ Children fared better in Jewish families. Exposure and infanticide were prohibited among Jews, for whom children were considered a blessing from God. Nevertheless, "children shared the social status of the poor, hungry, and suffering."²

So bracket present-day rhetoric about cherished children and think rather of children as the voiceless ones, the invisible ones, the vulnerable ones, the ones at the bottom of the pecking order.

Jesus identifies himself with the child and says that receiving the child is tantamount to receiving him. Jesus also teaches that taking care of a child—a lowly, stereotypically female task—is an important act of servant love that brings a person close to God.³ Jesus says, "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all" (9:36). Servant of all—even the children.

The men who comprise the Twelve had been arguing about being the greatest—being first. Instead of a harsh rebuke, they receive alternative marching orders: If you want to be first, then humble yourself to welcome and serve the little child. Interestingly, this teaching takes place within the house at Capernaum—probably the same house where the paralytic was lowered through the roof by the four friends with gutsy faith (2:1-12).

For all of its counter-cultural shock value, the teaching about serving children seems unambiguous. Yet when Jesus and the disciples set out for Judea in chapter 10, the disciples show their continued neglect of Jesus' inclusive love ethic. Verses 13-16 describe a public encounter between Jesus and children. People are bringing children to Jesus "so that he might touch them" (healing and/or blessing implied; 10:13a). Rather than remembering the encouragement to welcome the child as Jesus himself, the disciples put on their celebrity gatekeeper act. We hear no tenderness or compassion in this reception: "the disciples spoke sternly to them [the people]" (10:13b). I imagine them shooing the children away.

Now Jesus loses his patience: "when Jesus saw this, he was indignant" (10:14). He rebukes the disciples and again acts out for them what they are to do. Jesus declares that it is "to such as these that the Kingdom of God belongs" (10:14). He welcomes the children, embraces them, and blesses them.

Two times in today's passage, Jesus lectures the disciples "do not stop /do not hinder him" (9:39); "do not stop /do not hinder them" (10:14). The latter instance, as we have just seen, concerns the children, the lowest-status persons in a household. The earlier instance concerns an unknown person whom the

¹ Judith M. Gundry-Volf, "Mark 9:33-37," *Interpretation* 53, no 1 (January 1999), 58.

² Judith Gundry-Volf, "To Such as These Belongs the Reign of God," *Theology Today* 56, no. 4 (January 2000), 472.

³ Gundry-Volf, "Mark 9:33-37," 57.

disciples have observed casting out demons in Jesus' name. John tries to win some brownie points with Jesus by relating that they tried to stop this man, since "he was not following us." Uh-ooh again!

The disciples are insecure about others healing in Jesus' name--especially given a recent failed attempt of their own to cast out an unclean spirit from a young boy (9:14-29). To protect their own insider status, they are ready to put a stop to critical Kingdom work.

The disciples not only operate with too narrow a definition of who's "in" and who's qualified. They also have the basic definition wrong. The point isn't following the faith community ("us"); the point is following Jesus. For his part, Jesus is quite content to endorse the healing and hospitality that is taking place in his name. As Timothy Geddert writes, rather than using the more typical image of the hierarchical organizational ladder, "Jesus chose another image, the image of 'rounders.' Jesus is in the middle and true inclusion in Jesus' circle involves positioning oneself 'around Jesus' (3:31-35; 4:10). Those around Jesus do not need to jockey for positions in the inner ring. There is room for everyone in the circle of rounders."⁴ The social organization of the Kingdom is unique.

Edwin Markham's four-line poem "Outwitted" supplies a relevant perspective:

He drew a circle that shut me out—
Heretic, rebel, a thing to flout.
But Love and I had the wit to win:
We drew a circle that took him in!

We can see how the two passages about children complement each other and contrast with the disciples' stories of seeking to designate rank and keep out interlopers. But what about the material in between: 9:42 – 10:12?

It seems to me that a theme for this entire section could be: Do not hinder the kingdom!

Love God, love your neighbor, and let the kingdom come!

For one thing, don't buy into the status markers that privilege one group over another. These divisions of power and privilege are destructive; they perpetuate domination and injustice. The text deals in turn with these status categories:⁵

Greatest and least
Outsiders and insiders
Aggressors and victims
Males and females
Children and adults

Jesus breaks these divisions down with his insistence on taking the weaker part and protecting those who are vulnerable. This includes the "hard" teaching about marriage and divorce and the difficult-to-hear sayings about how those who lead "little ones" astray will themselves suffer.

⁴ Timothy J. Geddert, *Mark* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 2001), 236.

⁵ See Ched Myers, *et al.*, *"Say to This Mountain:" Mark's Story of Discipleship* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1996), 116.

There isn't time to dig into the teaching about divorce in this sermon (come to SS), but notice how Jesus stresses the importance of the covenant relationship between husband and wife and the one flesh that is not meant to be divided. The Pharisees have asked about divorce and Jesus instructs them about marriage—he changes the terms of the discussion and quotes Scripture—Genesis, rather than the Deuteronomy text they are using. Jesus blames human “hardheartedness” for the institution of a divorce clause. As part of a patriarchal legal system, the divorce clause favors the husband and jeopardizes the well-being of the wife who is issued a certificate of divorce. Most often, the husband sought a divorce because the wife had not borne him any children and/or because he was attracted to someone else whom he wished to marry instead.

The Pharisees focus on legal technicalities when they ask, “is it lawful?” But Jesus looks to fundamental values and relationships: let no one separate those whom God has joined together (10:9). Privately (10:10-12), Jesus elaborates for the disciples the principle of gender equality. If either the husband or the wife gets a divorce in order to marry someone else, he/she has committed adultery. This is not a comprehensive teaching about marriage and divorce (it has a specific backdrop—the censure of King Herod by John the Baptist and John's death), but it figures as important teaching about responsibility, loyalty, and equality.

Hardheartedness thus joins selfish ambition as a hindrance to kingdom living.

The temptation to sin is the other category of hindrance given prominence in the passage. Anything that causes one to sin (9:42-50) is better amputated—gotten rid of. This is expressed in harsh terms, which suggest we are better off without parts of ourselves if those parts are leading us—and others—astray. To abuse others is to dominate. To cause others to stumble in their faith is to violate trust. To sow discord in the community is to undermine the reconciling thrust of God's kingdom. Such behavior is unacceptable. It will come back upon the person as a judgment.

The negative examples are weighty. The verbal tone is demanding. But alongside these strong words from Jesus is the double visual image of his embrace of children—the one in the Capernaum house, the other in the Judean countryside. In his embrace, we see enacted the core value of radical love—the love that levels inequality and breaks down categories of who's in and out, the servant love that defines care of the vulnerable as most important, the renouncing of self in order to welcome the Lord of heaven and earth.

Do not hinder them! Take the roof off, if you must, but bring the paralytic to Jesus!⁶ Hear the Syro-phenician woman's plea on behalf of her daughter and liberate the powerless foreigner.⁷ See the children—the invisible, voiceless, vulnerable ones-- and embrace them with the radical, inclusive love that God has already shown to us.

For God has welcomed us into his reign with open arms, inviting us *as his children* to enjoy the gift of the peaceable kingdom. This blessing is not for us alone, it is for us to share and see multiplied.

So listen. Jesus says, “Let the children come unto me.” Jesus says, “Whoever welcomes one such child in my name, welcomes me.”

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⁶ See October 11, 2009 sermon “Gutsy Faith.”

⁷ See October 25, 2009 sermon, “Cooking with Crumbs.”