

The Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost
September 23, 2012
Mark 9:30-37
The Rev. Kara Wagner Sherer

I was hoping to run into a young man this morning; one of those stereotypical young men they show on the news whenever there is gang trouble. A young man whose pants hang so low they seem to stay up only by magic. He may swagger, have piercings and toos and talk like a rap artist. I wanted to invite him to church because this is the child I image is in the center of today's gospel story.

Jesus hears his people arguing about which one of them is the greatest. He grabs a kid out of the crowd, "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me."

He might have picked up a little child like the one in the picture on our bulletin cover, the story says he held him in his arms. But the point of the story is not little and cute. Jesus didn't say that if you welcome a cute, loved, full of potential little child you are welcoming God. Little child in Jesus' context meant vulnerable, dependent, of doubtful potential. Not many children of his time even made it to adulthood. Whoever welcomes the vulnerable, the dependent, those of doubtful potential is welcoming Jesus. And whoever welcomes Jesus is really inviting God in. You want God in your life? Try welcoming that stereotypical young man I didn't manage to drag into church this morning.

But let's work backwards. Why is Jesus dragging a street child into the center of his circle? Because his inner circle is arguing about who is the greatest. They really don't understand Jesus and his mission at all. This must be serious because Jesus doesn't just scold the few gossipers; he calls all twelve together and sits them down. He gives them a talking to in a technique now know as "a come-to-Jesus moment."

"Let's get this straight. Being my follower is not about being great, or becoming great, or earning our way to God. It is about being vulnerable, dependent and of doubtful potential. That is who God is with. That is where God is.

You are afraid to ask me what I mean when I tell you that I will be betrayed, and human justice will fail me, and I will be killed and in three days rise by the power of God. You are afraid to ask me what it means because you know exactly what it means. Being a follower of Jesus is denying success, having the courage to be vulnerable, giving over your power to the power of God."

This is not a particularly popular week to be dependent. We heard this week that 47% of Americans are a real drag on our nation; threatening our status as the greatest nation on earth.

The real horror of this worldview is not the placing of blame on the elderly, the working poor, or children who depend on government assistance. The real lie is the number. 47% of Americans pay nothing and receive aid? The truth is that the percentage is actually 100%. 100% of us depend on each other to grow, learn, work, and become valuable members of society. 100% of us are vulnerable, and will need assistance our whole lives. 100% of us are of doubtful potential, unless someone gives us what we need to realize our potential.

“Oh, no!” you cry. “You’re telling us Jesus was a Socialist!”

I don’t think any political ideology lines up with the radical way of life that Jesus advocated. There is a difference between submitting to an imposed political system and choosing to shape our political life by the values of the gospel. Being a Christian should mean that we are more politically active than ever. Being a Christian means we recognize that we are 100% dependent on God and each other. Being a Christian means we are not afraid to admit our vulnerability because we know that we will know God more fully when we are vulnerable. Being a Christian means we know those of doubtful potential are worth investing in, even after multiple failures, because we are all of doubtful potential without the resurrection power of Christ.

Not only did you not build that alone; you haven’t done anything alone. That means that each of us had some part in making a technological wonder like the iPhone 5 possible. We are part of the community that made that happen, whether or not we invented, worked on, paid for, or profited from, or not. It also means that we are responsible for the 9 people killed by violence in our city this week, whether we pulled the trigger, ignored the cries for help, bandaged the wounds or just stood by.

Jesus did not gather his disciples around the window in front of the Apple store and say, “Whoever welcomes one such wonder in my name welcomes me.” He was standing in front of that window, but facing the other way, to the young person standing in line who just has to have the newest best technology in order to be the greatest. And Jesus says, “Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.”