Sermon for The Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Delivered at Christ Church Los Altos on Sunday, September 23, 2018

Title: Last place

Mark 9:30-37

Jesus and his disciples passed through Galilee. He did not want anyone to know it; for 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.” But they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him.

Then they came to Capernaum; 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. He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, “Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.” Then he took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms, he said to them, “Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.”

During Spring Break in my second year of college, I took part in a trip through Duke Chapel with Heifer International to a tiny village in Honduras - Ojos de Agua - in a remote part of the country. Throughout the year, our group met once a week, getting to know one another, praying together, and reflecting on a dense reading list covering everything from to the history of Central America to liberation theology. Heifer International had been organizing near Ojos de Agua for many years. Their model involved inviting individuals and communities to reflect together on their needs and then apply for funding and support to bring projects to light. They work with many generous donors and volunteers from some of the wealthiest countries in the world – like ours – but they don’t go into a place assuming that they know how to be helpful. Instead, they do the slow, important work of getting to know people, establishing trust, and listening carefully.

The people of Ojos de Agua applied to a program with them that would bring work teams and supplies to rebuild the home of one family: a father with three young children whose wife had died of cancer two years earlier and whose house had been washed away in a mudslide months later. The father worked at a nearby (American-owned) sugarcane plantation earning one dollar and fifty cents a day, and he had help from neighbors and siblings in caring for his three boys, but he was never going to be able to afford to rebuild his home and the village as a whole didn’t want them to be perpetually unsheltered. To be clear - the village could have applied for a generator, help building infrastructure to the
government-maintained roads, assistance creating a meager waste management system, but they collectively felt their most important asset was one another, and investing in this family – these children – would do the most to ensure their long term well-being.

So our team became one in a rotation of international visitors bringing materials, money, and labor in order to build this house. We slept in an old school on cement floors and thin blankets. We awoke each day to the smell of wood smoke and the sound of homemade tortillas clapped between calloused hands. We showered in a makeshift box under the sky with cold water and started each day with Morning Prayer. And then we dug, mixed cement, wove rebar, set bricks, carried materials, and generally did whatever the project manager told us to for about ten hours a day in sweltering heat, at the end of which we’d be fed local specialties, maybe given a tour of the nearby villages, maybe invited to sit near a fire as the sun went down and sing, maybe treated to stories told by the elders. There was no electricity. No real privacy. Life was so intimate, and lives so intimately interconnected.

I was old enough at that point to know some things about history and current affairs, but I had never encountered poverty like that, and with it such unexpected, radical hospitality and generosity of spirit. Up until then, the poor of the world were “them,” and they were invisible to me. And forever at some had names and faces, hopes and dreams, scars and stories. Over the course of just a few days, “they” became people.

Today, Jesus and his friends are passing through Galilee as he continues to tell them that he will soon be betrayed, killed, and three days later resurrected. But the disciples still don’t understand why he is saying this. They can’t conceive of what he is talking about, it makes no sense, and so the words are strange, unwelcome, bewildering. And yet, despite how much they love and trust him, they are afraid to ask for clarification. When the group finally arrives in Capernaum, Jesus asks what they were arguing about, and they don’t respond, having been arguing about who was the greatest. Imagine! There Jesus was, God made flesh, trying to tell his disciples what is coming, to help them understand who he is and what he is purposing, and not only do they not understand and not inquire but he catches them naval gazing, positioning, wondering who among them is the bigger man.

And so, Jesus tries to explain it to them another way. “Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.” True greatness, he says, is not about being served, but
being of service. It is tempting to think this is a new teaching, distinct from what he was saying earlier – a different section of the Discipleship 101 syllabus - but that is not the case. This is a continuation of what he has been saying about the cross and the tomb, because it is Jesus’ embodiment of servant leadership that will so threaten the powers of the world, that will so enrage those used to being served, that they would rather murder him than look at their lives and their worlds differently. It is Jesus’ radical solidarity with people like the villagers in Ojos de Agua - the vulnerable, dependent, and unsheltered around the world - that leads to the cross and the tomb.

But his disciples still don’t get it, looking at him with confusion, frustration and annoyance bubbling up within, as they scratch their heads. Undeterred, Jesus calls over a child and places it in the middle of them, saying, “Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.” Now to begin to understand the radically counter-cultural nature of this message, we need to remember that children were not people in the ancient world. Our culture idealizes childhood, romanticizing the innocence and wonder of children, the utter dependence of the young, so much in need of our support and protection. But in ancient societies children were nothing. They had no rights, no inherent dignity, no value. Empires did not recognize their personhood. They were “them.” They were invisible. The very idea that a child would have any standing, any value, anything to teach adults, and particularly male adults, would have been absurd. Offensive, even. And yet here Jesus is, saying that if his disciples want to be truly great – eternally great – they must learn to welcome, embrace, tend, care, serve those among them who cannot confer power or status on them, who will actually impinge on their independence, who can offer nothing in return. People with great need. People who were previously hidden from view.

There are a lot of invisible people in our world today: people we might be peripherally aware of but not actually see; people our culture and society work hard to hide from view. Think of those suffering from mental illness who were for years locked away in state-run asylums, and the unfortunate many who still are. Think of the almost 2 million human beings locked away in prisons in this country. Think of those with developmental delays and ability differences often hidden from the view of the general public. Think of the gardeners and waiters and Uber drivers and trash collectors sleeping in their cars on the
streets of our communities. Think of the children in our foster system, in juvenile justice systems, in detention centers. Think of the over three billion people – almost half the world’s population – living beneath the international poverty line, surviving on less than one dollar and ninety cents a day, like the people of Ojos de Agua, like the three little boys, whose home I once helped to build, who are surely now men themselves, and may or may not be laboring alongside their dad at the sugarcane plantation.

Jesus plucks up one of “them” – note that the child in this story has no gender; it is not a he or a she but actually an “it” – and puts them in the center of his closest circle, and invites the disciples to see someone who had been previously invisible to them. To make room in their lives and their hearts for this very vulnerable, overlooked, sometimes troubled, often traumatized plurality that we actually have to work quite hard not to notice, be quite vigilant about keeping at bay. And so, the alarming question before us is: when Jesus comes into our lives telling us life-giving but difficult truths, how will he find us? Willing to take the risk and ask for help understanding? Or arguing amongst ourselves about who is the greatest? Who has the nicest car, the biggest house, the most robust investment portfolio, the most impressive titles, who has worked for the most prestigious companies, gone to the best universities, tasted the most rarefied wines?

Now to my knowledge Jesus never said we aren’t to enjoy this life – if anything, I think Jesus wanted to us to enjoy it to its fullest potential – and surely delighting in some of our accomplishments is not all bad. (I myself have diplomas from two renowned Universities hanging in my own office.) The problem is that positioning, vying for power and prestige, not only can but inevitably will distract us from the much more demanding, much more bewildering, much more life-giving work of the Gospel, still as radically counter-cultural and beguiling to most as it was in Jesus’ time: the work that leads to fullness of life, to joy, to fulfillment and deep meaning.

I think we, like the disciples, know when we have missed the mark. The disciples don’t answer Jesus when he asks them what they have been talking about because they know it is not a worthy topic of discussion. They know it is a waste of time. But they got distracted. It happens. Similarly, we can look over last year’s statements, our giving records, our calendars, we can look at how we have been spending our precious time, money, and energy, and generally know how close we are to our ideals.
Heifer International was very thoughtful about framing our trip not as an opportunity for us to be of service but an opportunity for us to build relationships, among the members of our team and with whom with whom we would briefly be staying. This was not a kind of helper-tourism, aimed principally at making us feel good about ourselves. After all, we could have just mailed the community of Ojos de Agua a check for the airfare for twelve people from Durham, NC to Tegucigalpa, along with all the money we spent on materials and food and bottled water and ground transportation and other staples. My guess is it would have been over $20,000: more than enough to hire some folks locally to build not only one house but a whole community, with some infrastructure and a generator thrown in.

By comparison our offering was rather meager, but it also was not the point. Because if we had just sent a check, they would have remained “them” to us, and we might have remained “them” to our hosts, and our lives would not have been changed by the mysterious alchemy of encounter, by new sight, and I and my teammates wouldn’t be able to witness for the rest of our lives with utter conviction to how smart and generous and inventive and creative and hard-working some of the world’s poorest people are, especially in the face of rampant stereotypes characterizing those on the margins as stupid, bad, or lazy.

No one has to go to Honduras to make the shift Jesus invites us into. There are opportunities before us all the time to turn toward those hidden from view, the invisibles in our midst, most of which don’t take a huge leap or require much of an investment. We can just, you know, try it. Look up a nearby prison (there’s one in Milpitas), a local mentoring organization that works with underprivileged kids (we support a great one through our Outreach grants), a non-profit focusing on affordable housing and tenant rights (Community Services Agency, with whom we work closely, does a lot of this work), a local hospital or treatment center or inpatient mental health facility. These places are all around us and many are desperate for volunteers and allies.

Our wider culture will not support us in this. It will still be more socially acceptable to ask someone at a cocktail party what they do or where they went to school than what breaks their heart, where they serve, who they recently saw for the first time and how it changed them, but thanks be to God those are conversation we can have with one another here, in this place.
The child has nothing to offer the disciples, and drawing nearer to the invisible people in our time will not make us more impressive, successful, or powerful. But it will make us more human. It will make us more fully present to our lives and to our world. It will draw us closer to the heart of God. For “whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.” Amen.

Continuing the Conversation
If today’s sermon sparked something in you, here are some questions you might hold in the week ahead or discuss with someone else:

- When have you felt invisible? Who, or what, helped you to feel seen again?
- In addition to people being invisible to us, a lot of places that make our lives comfortable and convenient are also hidden from view: energy plants, factory farms, landfills, not to mention the prisons and asylums referenced above. How would seeing these things regularly impact the choices you make every day?
- Who sends us into the world?