

After hearing that passage, you might be thinking, Joel, you're laying it on a little thick this morning. On the Sunday we alter our worship schedule, our sanctuary, our liturgy and bulletins to welcome children into worship, this is the week we hear Jesus saying, "Anyone who welcomes one of these children in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me." Fine, we get it. Welcoming children is a good thing. You don't have to shove it down our throats. But let me remind you that I don't choose our scripture readings, the lectionary does. This just happens to be the reading for this week, and I am as surprised as you are.

We are continuing in this series called the Upside-Down Kingdom, in which Jesus is overturning our expectations of what God's presence in our midst looks like. This week, the issue is greatness. What does it mean to be great in God's kingdom? The disciples didn't get it, and I don't think that we do either. In fact, I don't think we want to get it. After all, we live in a culture that is obsessed with greatness, and we all know what greatness is. Greatness is about being the best—outperforming your competitors. It's not just sports. It's everything. We want to know where the best schools are. Anybody here have an opinion on where the best schools in our state might be? I thought you might. Has anyone ever received a mug that says, "A decent Dad." No, of course not. We get one that says, "World's Greatest Dad." What makes a great pastor? Obviously, it's one who can grow a church bigger and better than others, especially as compared to other churches in the neighborhood. A great student doesn't just get good grades but better grades than her peers. A great lawyer wins cases that others lose. We all know what greatness is, don't we? So why on earth can't Jesus seem to understand what the rest of us already know?

It all starts with Jesus teaching his disciples that he is going to be handed over to those who will kill him. Of course, he said this last week, and Peter pulled Jesus aside to explain to him how this Messiah thing works, and it doesn't involve getting murdered. But Jesus persists that this is the way, and he invites us to follow him in it and take up our cross as well. We are as resistant to this message as Peter and the disciples were. We want to win without first losing. We want the victory without the struggle, and the resurrection without the cross, but that's not how it works. So, Jesus explains to them again,

"The Human One will be delivered into human hands. They will kill him. Three days after he is killed he will rise up." But they didn't understand this kind of talk, and they were afraid to ask him.

Jesus tells them I'm not getting out of this alive. In fact, none of us will. I love that the Common English Bible translates, "Son of Man" as "The Human One." It brings to the forefront that as Jesus is talking about himself, he's not merely talking about himself but all humanity. He is the Human One and as fellow humans, our story finds meaning and completion in him. His life is the pattern that all our lives must and will take. Though we will not all be killed by the state, at some point we will all be delivered over into the power of others.

We are not as in control of our lives as we think we are. I think that's one of the most disconcerting things about this pandemic. It's exposed how little control we have. We are the wealthiest nation the world has ever known, yet a virus that's 50-140 nanometers can grind our way of life to a halt. For perspective, a human hair is 75,000 nanometers, and this virus is 50-

140 nm, yet this tiny particle has caused 4.5 million deaths worldwide and 667 thousand here in America. We are not as strong as we think we are, and all our wealth cannot save us from the inevitable. Eventually, like Jesus, we will all die. We can ignore that truth and deny it all we want, but if it happened to the Human One, that means it will to us too.

But the disciples don't understand Jesus, and they are afraid to ask him what he means. How often do we fail to understand simply because we are afraid to ask? We don't want to look foolish, so we stay silent. But Jesus sees through their silence and asks them, what were you arguing about back there? Crickets. They didn't want him to know they were arguing about who was the greatest. Maybe they're coming up with a succession plan if Jesus does in fact get killed. Whatever their reasoning, they are embarrassed, and Jesus catches them with their hand in the stupid jar. You have to love the disciples in Mark. They give us hope, because how often does Jesus catches us with our hand in the stupid jar? Once or twice? No, more times than we can count, with no end in sight, and it turns out, that's OK. Psalm 130 says, "If you, Lord, kept a record of sins, who could stand? But with you there is forgiveness." The irony of the Christian faith is that we don't get to God by doing things right but by doing them wrong. For it is when we do wrong that we discover what we need most, which is grace.

Jesus' response to his disciples' foolishness, to their persistent not-getting it, is not to yell at them or shame them. No, he gently and lovingly instructs them:

He sat down, called the Twelve, and said to them, "Whoever wants to be first must be least of all and the servant of all." Jesus reached for a little child, placed him among the Twelve, and embraced him. Then he said, "Whoever welcomes one of these children in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me isn't actually welcoming me but rather the one who sent me."

Do you want to know what greatness looks like in the kingdom of God? It has nothing to do with what we think of greatness. It's not about outperforming your competitors. It's not about winning. It's about serving, but most of all, it's about vulnerability. Do you want to be great? Then stop trying to be great and embrace the weakness and vulnerability of life. The reason Jesus embraces a child is not because children were understood to be innocent and pure. It's because they had the lowest place on the social ladder of the time. They embody the lowest and least, and it's their weakness that makes them great in God's sight. For it is only when we are weak and vulnerable that we are able to receive from God what we need most, which is grace.

In the upside-down kingdom of God, greatness comes by embracing what is lowest and the least, both in others and in ourselves. That's what Jesus' entire life and ministry is all about. That's what Jesus did for us. He didn't use power to get his way and to defeat his enemies. Instead, in love he allowed his enemies to defeat him, and in doing so, demonstrated what true power and greatness really are. Paul in 1 Corinthians 1:18 says one of the most profound things ever written. He says, "The message of the cross is foolishness to those who are being destroyed. But it is the power of God for those of us who are being saved." This is one of the most unexpected things Paul could ever have written. God's power is most clearly manifest not in the resurrection but in the cross. Therefore, if we are to know the power of God in our lives, it will be known through loss, abandonment, and vulnerability. The grace of God comes to us in our weakness and embraces us.

Jesus embraces a child and says whoever can welcome weakness and vulnerability like this child, welcomes me. So may this be our prayer: welcome. Welcome children of Covenant. We are so glad you are here. For in welcoming you, we welcome Christ. Welcome weakness and vulnerability. Welcome what is lowest and least both within us and among us, for this is where the power of God is made manifest. I love that verse in All Creatures of Our God and King that sings to death, "And you, most gentle sister death, waiting to hush our final breath: Alleluia! Alleluia! Since Christ our light has pierced your gloom, fair is the night that leads us home. Sing praises! Alleluia! Alleluia! Alleluia! Alleluia!" Welcome weakness, and yes, even welcome death. We welcome all that is weak, because God first welcomes us in our weakness and embraces us with love.