

SLD09.20.09 25th Ordinary
Emory Presbyterian Church
Mark 9:30-37
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“God’s Love Language”

Here we go again. Jesus foretelling his suffering, death and resurrection to his disciples. He did it last week, he’s doing it this week, and he’ll do it yet again in Mark. And again and again and again in *our* own hearing, and hearts, and lives. Maybe he figures if he repeats himself often enough, his disciples will get it. But Jesus’ disciples did *not* get it, says Mark, and are afraid to ask him what the heck he’s talking about.

As if to drive home the measure to which the disciples are clueless, Mark then has Jesus asking them, “So, what were you guys arguing about on the way here?”

He knows, of course. He’d overheard.

“Well, *I’m* the greatest among the disciples,” boasts Peter, “because Jesus called me *first*. Hellooo. - the rock on which he built the church?”

“Well,” says Matthew, the tax collector, “I figure *I* rule because he called me the *furthest!*” chuckling at his own joke.

“You guys,” grouse James and John, sons of thunder. “You always think *you’re* the only ones in the running.”

“When everybody knows *I’m* his favorite!” chirps John.

“The whole lot of you is full of balloons,” snaps Judas. “*I’m* the only one who really knows what’s going on here.”

And he’s got a point.

“So, what were you guys arguing about on the way here?”

They'd been arguing about which one of them was the greatest, but embarrassed, they remain silent

"Okay guys, come here. Gather round," says Jesus. "Let me say it again: Follow me, you gotta take up a cross. Does that sound like one somebody's gonna be any greater than another? Try to save your life, you gonna lose it. Lose your life for my sake, you gonna gain it. The last gonna be first, the first gonna be last, and you'll be surprised to find out who ends up *everybody's* servant. Savvy?"

The disciples sigh. They're pretty sure Jesus loves them, and they've grown awfully fond of *him*. In fact, after all they've witnessed, heard, and hoped for, they're hoping for great things from him. But half the time they have no idea what he's talking about. The last are first, the weak are strong, the poor are rich, losers are winners - everything Jesus says goes against what they take for granted is true; against everything that ever *has* been true for them.

Anyway, around Galilee, the winners, the rich, and the strong are the Romans. And here, finally, is a Savior with God on his side, like the prophets predicted would come. Jesus is their first chance in ages to break free of the Italian invaders. High on a heady dose of power and possibility, how can the disciples resist heart-opening visions of shackles broken free, of freedom from oppression, of ruling their own roost? All these years of Roman occupation and *finally* things are going their way! The timing is right, the people are ready, Jesus has been anointed... what can stop them now?!

"Except maybe Jesus himself with all this crazy talk about suffering and death," thinks James. "And calling Peter 'Satan' for objecting to it. 'Get behind me, Satan!' he said the other day to Peter, who was only trying to move him past this sacrificial kick.

‘Get behind me, Satan,’ he says to him, ‘for you are setting your mind not on divine but on human things.’ And what’s so divine about suffering and death, I want to know?

“And then getting so mad when we can’t pull off what he can pull off. ‘You faithless generation,’ he hollers the other day when we can’t cast a demon from a man’s son. “How much longer must I be among you?” he says. “How much longer must I put up with you!?”

“Was he addressing the crowd, or us or the man who’d brought the boy? Who knows? He just forever seems like a really unhappy messiah.”

Such thoughts run through the disciples’ minds as they stare blankly at their leader.

But then Jesus does something unexpected. This little wide-eyed street urchin is wandering by. Jesus grabs her puts her on his lap.

“See this kid?” he says, pointing to the tousled thumb-sucker in his lap.

And you and I, we think, “cute.” But “cuteness” wasn’t a big value in first century Palestine, and neither were kids. In Jesus’ day, until they could start pitching in around the house, kids were just another mouth to feed. If they lived long enough to pitch in. Which they mostly didn’t, which was another reason people didn’t get too attached to them. I mean, where was this kid’s mother, letting this strange rabbi handle her girl?

In any case, when Jesus says, “see this kid?” the disciples don’t see “cute;” they see next to nothing. They see “nobody.” Not even a half grown “nobody.” What they see is a useless, powerless, abandoned “house ape,” as my father used to call his daughters, hardly worth a moment of *their* attention, never mind their Master’s. Maybe they see, too, a glimpse of themselves back before *they* had fought and scraped and

pushed their way from those weak, ignoble beginnings into adulthood. And not just into adulthood, but into adults who *matter*, who count for something; responsible, mature and reliable grown-ups who hold down jobs and care for their families and make a difference in their communities. The disciples weren't always "somebody" but they are now, and what's on their mind now is *which* "somebody" is greater than the others.

And here's Jesus holding this slimy little slumpuppy in his arms, this dirty, ragged, useless kid who's never accomplished a thing, as if she were God's gift to creation? Which, despite her diminutive size, status and contribution, Jesus apparently thinks she is? And we're talking before she's helped around the house, or made good grades, or gotten pretty, or married anybody - already this one is beloved to Jesus, simply in her "being?"

"You welcome the 'beingness' of one such child in my name and you welcome me," says Jesus. (See why we practice infant baptism?) "Welcome me," he says, "and you welcome God." What's Jesus trying to get across to his obdurate, fussy disciples? And the kid on his lap, what is she meant to learn?

Last Wednesday night Deedra led a program based on singer-songwriter and former television talk show host Gary Chapman's popular "Five Love Languages." Chapman's developed the idea that there are five very different languages with which to express love, languages so different, in fact, that speaking one language, even with the best of intentions, may be entirely unintelligible to the other. The key to a successful relationship, he suggest, is to discover the love language that your beloved speaks so that you can communicate your love in a way that's understood. Always helpful to know one's own love language, of course, so you can assist another in speaking it.

There's not time this morning to elaborate on the differences among these languages, but in case you weren't there on Wednesday night, let me just tell you what they are:

If you feel especially loved when people express how grateful they are for you, and for the simple everyday things you do, you speak the love language of "Words of Affirmation."

If the best way for someone to express their love for you is by giving you personal, undivided attention, then your love language is "Quality Time."

If, on the other hand, the way you most appreciate being loved is by gifts and other tangible expressions of love, then "Receiving Gifts" is your love language.

If nothing helps you feel loved more than someone pitching in and helping you around the house or running errands, then your love language is "Acts of Service."

And finally, if you feel especially loved when a person expresses feelings for you through physical contact, then your love language is "Physical Touch."

These languages of love are different enough from one another that a person speaking one might not be understood by a person who speaks another. When a person favors one language, another might not get through to them at all.

Fortunately for us, when it comes to Love Languages, God is multilingual. To communicate divine love, acceptance, forgiveness, and reconciliation, God speaks all five languages of love and probably a few more Chapman hasn't thought of. If you speak the language of affirmation, you and God might commune best through words and acts of praise and adoration. If you go for the language of physical touch, God might come to you in a dramatic moment of conversion, like Saul on the road to Damascus. If

quality time is the most important for you, you and God might only come together over time, through a long, slow, developing relationship. Then again, other people and God love each other best by doing acts of service. You get the idea.

A primary dialect God speaks to express love to creation is the gift of Jesus Christ, offered for the healing of creation. This is the gift Jesus kept trying to give the disciples a heads-up about – “The Son of Man must undergo great suffering, ...and be killed, and after three days rise again.” Only at the time it doesn’t sound like much of a gift. Or if it is, it’s sure not at the top of *their* Christmas list. The language of gift-giving is not registering so well with the disciples.

So Jesus, being God and all, shifts gears to another language. Forget for the moment forecasting the future. Never mind trying to get the disciples to understand God’s plan and Jesus’ place in it. Give up trying to sort out arguments about the disciples’ respective ranking. Instead, Jesus grabs a passing kid, hold hers in his arms (the language of physical touch), and conveys the message (the language of affirmation) that before God, *this* one is the greatest. Not the one with the most chips, or the rich and famous, or the holiest or most pure, but this immature, unaccomplished miniature human being is infinitely cherished by God *just as she is*.

And so...*are...you* ...Jesus is trying to get across to his anxious, fretful disciples. So are you precious and beloved of our Creator just as you are, regardless of your current, past or future accomplishments or failures, regardless of your behaviors, addictions, or idiosyncrasies, your faith, doubts or downright disbeliefs. You are beloved of God *just as you are*. As is the person sitting next to you, or across from you,

or behind or in front of you. Just because...*that's* the way God loves. *That's* what God keeps inventing languages to help us know.

The Rev. Dr. Stephen Muse directs the Pastoral Institute in Columbus, Georgia, where I spent a week during my sabbatical. In his book called *Beside Still Waters*, Muse speaks of a person whose "sense of belovedness was injured along the way." Along the way of his life, Stephen meant. And who of us could not be described the same way? Whether or not we can point to a particular person, family dynamic, or circumstance that left us feeling somehow less than lovable, what member of the human family somewhere along the way does *not* experience injury to our personal sense of belovedness? Who of us feels fully beloved of God, of one another, of the important people in our lives all the time?

But when we do, in those moment when we *do* feel cherished and accepted and beloved, when we *do* feel at home in our own hearts, in the heart of another, and in the heart of God, what changes for us? How are we different? How do our behavior, our choices, our priorities shift? Who do we become at our most beloved best?

The journey toward recovering one's personal sense of belovedness before God can be a whole lot harder than it sounds. But what better definition of salvation?

And when people like you and me, people genuinely seeking God, opening ourselves to an authentic growth in relationship with the Divine, exploring, cultivating and deepening our own belovedness before God, and then seeking to share and serve from that place of belovedness, that's what we call "church." At least the church at its best.

That's what Jesus wants his disciples to understand.

Sometimes we get ahead of ourselves and serve out of something besides belovedness – say duty or guilt or a drivenness to please. Other times our belovedness is so injured, we can't love or serve at all. But on our good days and at our best, we allow God to fill us with a peace and a love and an acceptance that allows *us* to go do and be what we are – beloved children of God, healed, whole human beings, who are able to share that love and truth and joy and freedom with others.

Sure, we at Emory Church have this pretty building we're all kind of attached to. And a fairly orderly organization that goes about its business in a fairly orderly fashion. And sure, we have fun together and fuss with each other and generally accompany one another on the journey of life. But that's not why we exist. We don't exist for business as usual or predictable worship or a contented community. Jesus didn't spend all his time making sure the disciples were happy; he spent all his time trying to show them who he is, trying to teach them who *they* are, and encouraging them to get out and share the good news with the people who don't know it yet. To share the good news with people whose sense of belovedness has been injured along the way like out, that God loves and accepts them as they are and offers healing through Christ Jesus.

Jesus held that child in his arms not only to establish her belovedness before God, but to confer that same blessing on his disciples, to reorient or "reset" them, if you will. To help them relax and understand themselves differently, to remind them that their worth, their standing, their value, their hope is grounded, not in their accomplishments or ranking or piety but in the unconditional love of their Creator God. *In order that they might share that word with others.* In order that they might become the verbs and nouns and adjectives of God's love language to the world.

That's why we exist, Emory Church. Not to be great, or strong, or numero uno; not to meet our budget or attain our vision or satisfy our strategic goals - those are just pointers to help us know in what direction to focus our efforts. Our purpose as a body of Christ is to accompany and support one another as we grow in relationship with God through Jesus Christ *so that* we might, through Outreach and Mission, share our faith with others. With those who, in relation to our loving God, are not here, there or anywhere yet. For "whoever welcomes such a one as this welcomes me," says Jesus. "And whoever welcomes me, welcomes God."

To the glory of God. Amen.