

**“To Be Great is to Practice God’s Hospitality” based on Mark 9:30-37 & James 3:13-4:3, 7-8
Delivered by Pastor Drew Mangione on September 19, 2021, at Shelby Presbyterian Church**

In Seminary, I had the privilege of taking a class taught by a professor named Dirk Smit. Smit was one of the primary authors of the Belhar Confession, written in 1982. This confession is the newest in our Presbyterian Book of Confessions. Smit is of Dutch heritage but was born and raised in South Africa. He was a pastor during his country’s embrace of apartheid, and the Belhar Confession, if you don’t already know, strongly rejected the theology his colleagues used to justify the harsh and unjust segregation and degradation of fellow human beings.

The class was, ‘Living with Strangers,’ and our first reading assignment was to read an excerpt from Sigmund Freud. If I’m honest, I was confused – no scripture or theology? This was psychology, but as I read, it made sense. In this writing, Freud argues that human nature is entirely self-interested. He says our primary concern in life is our own comfort and survival. This may include the comfort and survival of our families, as well, but this too is rooted in our own interests. From there, Freud said, perhaps others who are like us, such as people in our community, or our country, but again, even this is for a self-interest.

Our readings today, from the letter of James and the gospel of Mark would agree. But unlike Freud, neither James nor Mark would argue that this is how it should be. No, in our readings today, the way of Christ turns human systems upside down. To follow Christ is to lay aside the jealousy that drives our competition, our desire to have more than our neighbor, be it financially, or as is the case of the apostles today, status or standing. To follow Christ is to let go of our self-interest, and welcome those who have nothing to offer us. Freud writes about how things are, but the way of Christ shows us how things should be.

The apostles, as Mark portrays them in today’s reading, confirm Freud’s analysis. Jesus has just predicted his death and resurrection, and it starts them arguing, not about what this will mean for Jesus or how it would impact the world, but about where they would stand with Jesus afterward. They are arguing about who is the greatest among them, Likely, about who will be the top officials and ambassadors, when Jesus comes into his reign after he has been killed and has risen again.

They argue over their own self-interest.

It seems that Jesus hears all of this as they walk the streets in Galilee to this home in Capernaum. We don’t know who’s home it is, but apparently, there are children inside. Jesus waits until they are inside, before he asks them what they had been saying. And when he asks, the apostles seem to realize they missed something in his teaching. They act like teenagers, or if we are honest – like any of us when we are embarrassed to have been overheard saying something. (“What did you say?” – “*Nothing.*”) They are silent.

Yet what they were doing was trying to claim the place where they stand among Jesus’s followers. So, Jesus instead stands a child among them, right in their center. It was like a children’s sermon with an object lesson. Then as the child stands among the apostles, Jesus then takes the child into his arms, not one of the apostles. He holds the child, giving the child what the apostles wanted, the status of a royal ambassador.

You see, in human hierarchies, when you welcome the top official of an earthly ruler, you do so, knowing that you are actually welcoming that ruler by your actions. If you treat this ambassador well or poorly, it will get back to the ruler whose opinion you're worried about. It is to your advantage, in your self-interest, to serve an ambassador well. To serve one poorly, would be treated as an insult to the ruler. But Jesus doesn't assign them the status of ambassadors. No, Jesus picks up a child and gives them that status. He says if you welcome a child, you are welcoming me, and what's more you welcome the one who sent me.

Jesus takes a child, who has absolutely no standing in ancient cultures, no rights. A child was property with no value until they were old enough to work and no status until old enough to marry. Here Jesus places that child among the disciples to stand among them as equals. He does not embrace one of them as greatest, but embraces the child. Jesus tells the apostles that it is not about them being embraced, but how they embrace others, and welcome them to join, not because it is in the self-interest of the apostles to do so, but because true greatness – what truly matters – is to welcome & embrace others, especially those who, like children, have nothing to offer, but need our love and care.

In this, Jesus is building on the discipleship instructions we read last week, that if we want to gain the life and identity that we can only find in Jesus, then we need to lay down the life and identity that we are holding on to. The apostles missed that to lay down their life meant claims of status too. So, Jesus puts it another way – the greatest is the servant of all. If anyone wants to be first, let them be last of all, a servant. You see, in God's Reign, greatness is in our hospitality, not our hospitality to those who we welcome to lift up ourselves, but who we lift up by welcoming them.

Today is heritage Sunday, and a special day in the life of our church here in Shelby. We honor our history as Presbyterians and our roots in the Scottish Presbyterian Church. The service uses hymns with tunes from the Scottish Psalter, we've processed in these beautiful tartans, and our liturgy is adapted from Scottish prayers and the Scots Confession. Our forebearers from Scotland and all of our Presbyterian tradition are a cloud of witnesses, upon which we stand in the faith. Just as we emulate and learn from the apostles – who sometimes screw things up, and often get things right – it is important we mimic their better traits and learn from their mistakes to be better as we walk this road with Christ.

Just as a child, especially someone else's child, cannot do anything for you, to repay you, so it is that God in Christ had called us and the faithful who came before us to serve, not because we have anything to offer that God absolutely needs from us, that God can't do for God's self, but because God wants us – God chooses us – God loves us.

One of my favorite verses in all of Scripture is Deuteronomy 7:7. In it, Moses tells the people that the Lord did show affection toward or choose Israel because they were great in number and thus, because they were great in power, but rather, the Lord chose them because they were the fewest, the least, and because the Lord loved them, and kept the promises made to their forebearers and the Lord led them to freedom. God's greatness is not that God chose the powerful, but that God chose the weak to make strong. This is God's hospitality, God's greatness. This is our calling as Christians.

James says that the wise and understanding show it by good works in humility. Bitter jealousy – the drive to have what others have, to accomplish worldly power – and our self-interest, putting our desires first, is not something to brag about. It's a lie. James says that these produce disorder and evil, which is not from God, but is earthly, it is just our natural instinct (unspiritual), and worse, it's demonic. Instead, what is holy comes first, and that brings peace, gentleness, reasonableness, or a willingness to yield, and it is full of mercy and of good fruit, impartial and without hypocrisy. This is what comes from God.

And so, if we are to pursue faithfulness and see the wisdom of God in what we do, then if it is about our status as Christians, our greatness, our power, it is not from God. But if it brings peace, gentleness, a willingness to yield, is full of mercy, and goodness, impartiality, and a desire for consistency, not hypocrisy, then it is from God.

My sisters and brothers, this is hard, especially that last part – consistency. How often are we for one thing and against another and they don't line up. But we are not alone – the good news is God is with us. In Christ, the Word of God that was God, shared in our humanity, our limited being, and even though equal to God, was humble to be obedient to the point of death, even death on a Roman cross, a punishment for slaves and rebels.

In this, the Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve us. You see, God loves us and chooses us, God wants us. Jesus did not come because God needed to redeem us, but rather because God wanted to redeem us. And so this death was for us, to defeat sin and death, and show us eternal, by his resurrection.

Friends, when we believe in this incredible truth – this crazy idea that God became a human like us to live, die and rise for us – then we come to realize that we've been called through the Holy Spirit to share in God's life. We are called to be servants in response to the way that God chose to love us. We believe and act not to avoid punishment or earn a reward, but because we are beloved.

We are called to follow our forebearers, on the path with Christ, to change the world for him, to play a part in the ministry of reconciliation. Our heritage is not a status, but an opportunity, because the gospel has been passed to us through this heritage. I want you to know the truth that you are loved by God simply for who you are as a human being. That's it. God is with you right now. Yes, God is with you in the Holy Spirit, by your side in good times and bad, as your advocate, giving you a share in the inheritance of Christ, the one and only Son of God who shares his inheritance with us as adopted children.

But what's more, this good news is not for our selfish interests, to hoard, and use to our own advantage, as Freud contended. Instead, the good news is for us to share with others, showing God's hospitality, by lifting them up, even when it is not to our worldly advantage. Amen.