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*Christ Lutheran Church, Ferndale, WA*

*Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost*

*September 19, 2021*

*Jeremiah 11:18-20; Psalm 54; James 3:13-4:3, 7-8a; Mark 9:30-37*

On this past windy, rainy Friday I showed up at church to get ready for the interment of Karen Flaherty's ashes in the columbarium in our Memorial Garden, only to find that the canopy that we were going to stand under for the interment of ashes had been completely destroyed by the awful windstorm that morning. That's one of the reasons that we're worshipping inside today. We ended up moving the service inside on Friday and it all turned out ok. But when I saw the canopy like that (it's still out there if you want to see the mess of a bent frame), I went into stress mode. I started running around like a chicken with my head cut off and I'm sure I growled at a few people—I'm very sorry if one of them was you.

You know, we all do weird things when we're stressed out. Maybe we snap at other people, maybe we turn inward, maybe we cry or get angry or even laugh, or maybe we do what the disciples did in our gospel story today.

You see, the disciples in today's gospel story in Mark 9 were stressed out. In the gospel of Mark up to this point, the disciples had watched Jesus heal, cast out demons, tell parables, raise a girl back to life, stop a woman from hemorrhaging, feed 5,000 people, walk on water, and be transfigured. They were thinking, wow, this guy is pretty amazing—I'm feeling good about the fact that I've given up my job and my family and followed him. I am so lucky to be his disciple.

Now, in the chapter before this one they had heard Jesus say that he was going to undergo suffering and be rejected, killed, and three days rise again, but Peter rebuked him. Here in chapter 9, they hear Jesus say it again as they passed through Galilee, that he would be betrayed into human hands, and they would kill him, and three days after being killed he would rise again.

And now, they are really stressed. The gospel says they didn't understand what Jesus was saying and they were afraid to ask him. How else could they

feel? This person they were so excited about following has just told them, for a second time, that he's going to die. And then be raised again. Of course they didn't understand. Of course they were stressed out and afraid.

And so, they did what many of us do when we're stressed—they argued and tried to manage their anxiety by building themselves up and putting others down. They didn't feel good about themselves or their situation, and so they argued among themselves about who was the greatest because, in reality, they each felt small and least and last.

I hope you see what's really going on here in the gospel, because I think it helps us to understand ourselves. You see, when we try to build ourselves up by putting others down, when we think we're greater than another, it's because we don't feel good enough about ourselves or our life situation. And the more stressed we are, the less good we feel about ourselves and our life situation, and the more we feel like we need to build ourselves up at the expense of others.

I don't think this is just a psychological problem; it's also a theological problem. Because what it means is that we don't trust who God made us to be in baptism. When you were baptized, God imparted to you the most important identity you have—child of God. As a child of God, you are equally precious and valued in God's sight to all of God's other children. You don't have to put others down in order to build yourself up, because you are enough in who you are as God's child. You don't have to try to be "first."

When Jesus heard that the disciples in their stress had been arguing with one another about who was the greatest, he sat down, told them that whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all, and then he used the best example he could of who in that society was last of all and servant of all—a child. Remember that children had a very low place in society—they were expected to be humble and serve the needs of adults and be neither seen nor heard. Basically, children were the epitome of vulnerability.

It was the vulnerable whom Jesus drew closest to himself. The vulnerable. Not the people who tried to be the best by putting others down. Not the ones who tried to be first and be the greatest. It was the people who were

humble, vulnerable, and powerless. Perhaps it was because those were the people who were most drawn to and dependent on God.

Jesus saw through the stress and anxiety of the disciples to understand their real need: to admit that they were vulnerable, to stop trying to be the greatest because they were all beloved. They all were enough. Jesus put a child in their midst to remind them that when they were humble and vulnerable, they would realize that they were equally precious and valued. They would see one another as God saw them. It was when they welcomed and became like children that they would draw near to God.

It's when we welcome and become like children that we draw near to God. And, as our reading from James reminds us, God draws near to us.

I'll tell you what else children can do for us. On Friday when I was so stressed out trying to figure out what to do about the broken canopy, Pat and Karen's grandchildren—Veda, Mack, and Dawson—came into church and they were laughing and spinning and joyfully playing. They didn't care that it was windy and rainy. They didn't care that one of our canopies had been destroyed by the wind. They were just happy to be around the people who loved them. They exuded joy. I swear my stress and my blood pressure dropped right there and then. Children can help us remember what's really important. They can help us to give us hope that everything really is going to be ok.

And they can help us remember that when we welcome the most vulnerable and admit our own vulnerability, we are welcoming Jesus himself. Amen.