

So *That's* where God Hangs-out!

[Text - Mark 9:33-37]

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For the most part, rich and powerful people have no inkling of how it feels to be poor or powerless. They're so accustomed to using their wealth and power to get what they *want*, that they really can't comprehend what it means to *be* in want. For many of them, the faceless poor are simply pawns to be used, rather than people to be cared for or helped. Of course, not all those with high positions or great power use it in a self-serving way. Jesus is an extraordinarily powerful individual; yet his power is rooted and grounded in his desire to live as a compassionate Child of the Holy One. For Jesus, this means graciously lifting-up the lowly, humbly serving those in need, and faithfully following the Divine path of love and grace - even though it leads him to the Cross. Jesus rightly claims the title of the *Messiah* - the Christ - because he willingly takes-on the role of a humble, vulnerable servant, described by Isaiah and the other prophets.

In this morning's New Testament reading, when Jesus declares that "the greatest" among us is to be the "servant of all", it creates a striking contrast to the way in which people often think about Life. That's why his disciples have such a hard time understanding what he means. So Jesus sits down, gathers them around and says, "Whoever wants to be first, must be last of all and servant of all." Then, to drive-home the point, Jesus gives them a concrete example. He takes a little child into his arms and says, "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name, welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me, welcomes not only me, but the One who sent me!"

To "welcome a *child*" means that you and I graciously receive *any* individual who society normally dismisses as being small and insignificant - those who lack power, prestige or influence in this world. The Holy One's children come in all ages and sizes, races and social strata. And in the Name of the Holy One, Jesus calls you and me to welcome every one of them, regardless of who they are! The fantastic thing about this, is that when you and I *do* it, we not only come to recognize the Divine Value of other people - we also come to more fully understand our own Divine connection and worth!

In the ten years between my serving as a Lutheran pastor and returning to pastoral ministry in the UCC, I worked with people with developmental disabilities, beginning with a job at Goodwill Rehabilitation Center in Columbus. I figured I would be a way for me to continue to make a positive difference in the lives of other people; and to some degree, it was. What I didn't realize, however, was the remarkable difference that those other people would make in *my* life.

At that time in my life, I was feeling emotionally battered and bruised, having been rejected by my former church family, and by various members of my own family. Yet in my job at Goodwill, I immediately discovered a remarkably welcoming and supportive community, and a kind of surrogate family. After *years* in the church of hearing - and preaching - about Divine *Grace*, I found my deepest experience of that Grace among a group of people with no particular religious background, or religious *baggage*! I was

blown-away by the openness, acceptance, and love that I received from those people with whom I worked - not only my coworkers, but especially the people for whom we provided services

People who have a conspicuous mental or physical impairment have no “closet” in which they can hide; and in this regard, they have a lot of valuable things to teach us all. They remind us that we *all* have our abilities, *and* our disabilities; and that every person, great or small, needs the understanding, compassion, and care of others in order to develop and thrive. And while we so-called “normal” people often try to hide our frailties and insecurities behind our fine words or our financial wealth - our personal power or our intellectual prowess - people with disabilities tend to be much more open and honest. They share their joy and sorrow, excitement and disappointment, gratitude and anger with a transparency that humbles our hypocrisy. But chiefly, they openly share their genuine love.

In this regard, people with perceptible disabilities can help us re-connect with our own fragile, inner-child; thereby offering us a tender, therapeutic touch - provided that we are willing to get close to them! When you and I distance ourselves from those who are struggling or hurting, because it reminds us of our own struggles and pain, then their suffering - and ours - continues. On the other hand, when we are willing to connect with them on a personal level, then the healing begins for us all! I will always be, deeply grateful for the inner-healing that I received from my friends at Goodwill. These beautiful people, who could look at me and accept me for who I was, taught me to look at Life in a fresh and refreshing way: through the eyes of an imperfect, yet perfectly loved child of the Holy One!

When Jesus talks to his followers about seeing Life from a new perspective, he doesn't use complex religious language or big words. He simply takes a little child into his arms and says, “Look! This is what it's really all about! This is how the Divine Realm is to be seen and experienced - not through the grand and glorious things [or people] of this world, but in the small and fragile and so-called *ordinary*.” And thus, a remarkable truth is revealed: That when you and I truly see those people who are considered “less” in the eyes of society, it is then that we will truly see -and know - the Divine, Transcendent Presence!

So perhaps the next time you and I feel disconnected from God - when we feel like our lives are drifting or meaningless - we can rediscover our sense of purpose and belonging, by reaching out to those around us who truly need our compassion and care. Because when you and I actually see those people who are often considered to be insignificant or invisible, we will begin to see the Hidden Holy One. And whenever you and I graciously welcome *any* vulnerable child of God into our hearts and lives, the Holy One will also slip-in, right there beside them!