

“Where Great Disciples Come From”
Zechariah 8:1-8; Mark 9:30-37
Rev. David Hutchinson
Sunday, Sept. 19, 2021

Have you ever been to the birthplace of someone - - - who did something GREAT?

Someone famous and well know...

The great movie star - - John Wayne - - was born in the little town of Winterset, Iowa.

5000 people live there now. / It's in Madison County, Iowa, and some of you may remember that movie - - "The Bridges of Madison County". / My mother was director of nursing - - for 10 years or more - - at Madison County Hospital - - in Winterset, Iowa. / I grew up 25 miles from the little white house which is John Wayne's birthplace - - and used to drive by on my way to work.

In that SMALL TOWN - - there is a TINY white house - - probably four rooms.

The birthplace of John Wayne.

A nondescript wooden sign on the porch is all that sets it apart from the rest of the street.

As the DISCIPLES - - ARGUE with each other - - in this morning's scripture reading from Mark's Gospel - - as they argue about who is the GREATEST among them - - - - I find myself wondering - - about their BEGINNINGS.

What was it that caused them to follow Jesus?

Was it something about where they were born or how they grew up?

I picture the towns - - in which these disciples were born.

The families and friends.

The synagogues they attended.

Today - - - - the VATICAN in Rome is named after one of them - - St. Peter.

These GREAT disciples.

I once read about a group of TOURISTS - - travelling through Europe - - visiting historical sites. / They were impressed by the small VILLAGES - - that were the birthplaces of so many GREAT ARTISTS, POETS, COMPOSERS, and POLITICAL LEADERS. / While the group was strolling through one particularly picturesque village - - - one of the tourists approached a man who was sitting in front of a building - - and asked, "Excuse me, but . . . were any GREAT men or women born in THIS village?"

The man thought for a minute - - - and then he replied,

"No - - - only GREAT BABIES!"

Everyone - - everyone starts off as a baby - - - with the opportunity to grow into greatness. / It is true of our Christian life as well. / We need to grow.

And - - - a lot of times - - - the kind of START we get makes a difference.

BUT - - - a lot of times - - - we grow AWAY - - -

- - - we grow in the WRONG direction.

- - - we get a strong start - - - and a weak finish.

- - - sometimes those with a weak start - - have a stronger finish.

Sometimes things get in the way - - life is unfair.

There is oppression and dishonesty and things stand in our way...

...of being who we were created to be.

When Jesus picks up a CHILD - - - in this morning's Scripture reading - - - and sets the child down in the midst of the disciples - - - who had been arguing - - - - he is doing MORE than JUST caring for a child.

Jesus is making a POINT to us - - - giving us - a REMINDER.

LOOK - - - at this child.

And - - - Jesus message - - - I think - - - is especially addressed to those of us - - who might be inclined to FINISH WEAK - - - or to THINK we have finished weak.

Jesus holds up the child - - as a reminder - - to us - -

- - BE like this child - -

- - be like YOUR childish YOU - - even now.

Some of us STARTED - - with God.

- - with strong homes and opportunities and privilege.

Are we STILL praying - - and trying - - and do we still hope?

Others of us faced challenge after challenge...

Where will we FINISH?

These are questions that Jesus seems to be asking the disciples. / And as Jesus talks - - - about what it MEANS to be a disciple - - - to be a SERVANT first - - - that being GREAT is really about SERVING - - - and SACRIFICE - - and SUFFERING - - -

- - - the disciples just DON'T get it.

They hardly HEAR Jesus.

And they argue - - instead of listening. / ARGUING about things like who will get the CORNER OFFICE in the kingdom of God.

The disciples are like a man who bought a PARROT:

The man said, "I want to RETURN this bird."

"I go up to the cage and ask, "can you talk"?"

The bird looks at me and says, "I can talk alright - but can you FLY?"

Like the man and his bird - - the disciples argue about greatness.

"I'm greater than you"

The more I thought about it - I wondered – if we ever respond to CHILDREN like that?

My uncle said, "How do you get to school?"

I said, "By bus," and my uncle smiled.

"When I was your age," my uncle said,

"I walked it BAREFOOT - - seven miles."

My uncle said, "How much weight can you tote?"

I said, "A bag of grain and a half." My uncle laughed.

"When I was your age," my uncle said,

"I could drive a wagon - and lift a calf."

My uncle asked, "How old are you?"

I said, "Nine and a half," and then

My uncle puffed out his chest and said,

"When I was your age - - I was TEN."

This poem by Shel Silverstein reminds us - it IS important to spend time with children.

BUT - it is ALSO important - - WHAT we teach them when we do.

And - - it's also important that we LISTEN.

LISTEN - - and OBSERVE - - - that's what I think Jesus PRIMARY intention is - - - -

as he sets this child in the midst of the disciples.

It's NOT really - - about JUST the child. / It's about how we should TREAT children...

AND - - it is about US.

How are WE doing - - - on our discipleship walk?

Are we - all that great?

Compared to a child...?

Are we just sitting around arguing - - like a bunch of adults?

Are we missing the point of it all?

Jesus says STOP - - - observe this child - - - and think:

Where did you BEGIN - - in YOUR walk with God?

How are you doing NOW?

Do you still have a childlike TRUST in God?

Are you willing to STOOP - - - to the level of a child?

To be a SERVANT - - - ?

Or are you always telling people how GREAT you are?

Always arguing...?

Part of the reason - - we baptize children - - as Presbyterians - - IS so that we will

CONTINUE to ask these questions of ourselves.

God's Holy Spirit - - WORKS in us - - - - before we even understand it. / At the very beginnings of our lives - - - we are God's. / We are CHOSEN by God - - to be loved.

Throughout our lives - - then - - - - we need to continually call ourselves BACK to God - - - and we need to affirm - and OWN - and accept - - what God was done in us.

We make it our own - - - when we are CONFIRMED as young people - - - or when we JOIN a church as members.

Hopefully - - - as we move through our lives - - - we will continue to SEE - - the CHILD in our midst - - - placed there by Jesus.

Zechariah - - the PROPHET - - gives us a VISION of what this WORLD would be like is we all DID THAT. / It is a VISION of the Kingdom of God. / A vision of the kingdom on earth.

Listen to how Elisabeth Achtemeyer describes Zechariah's vision:

"The kingdom of God is a public park - - where children can run and play in its squares, in safety, fun and delight. / It is a place where no pervert is waiting to lure one of them away with offers of candy; where no drug pusher is lurking to tempt the older children; where no one is abused, or unwanted, or malnourished. The kingdom of God, says Zechariah, is a public park where the STREETS are safe for children."

The kingdom of God is NOT a never-never land.

It is LIFE HERE - - on earth - - TRANSFORMED - - by people who live as DISCIPLES.

And for the kingdom of God to come - -

And for the STREETS to be safe for children - -

We need PARENTS - - and ADULTS - -

- - who DEPEND on God - -

- - and who believe in the power of God - -

- - and who HUMBLE themselves, like a child is humble - -

- - and who LOVE God - - like a child loves - -

- - in the beginning - -

- - when the child is still a child.

When WE - - can love like that - - we will be on our way - -

- - to becoming GREAT disciples.

But - - how many of us - - even remember our baptism date?

How many of us are willing to devote our lives to OTHERS first?

As I think about the recent spread of the Covid virus among children - - these questions burn I my mind. / Children are dying in hospitals - - and no one seems able to put their OWN wants and opinions - - in the back seat long enough - - to sacrifice for anyone else. / There seems to be something - - off kilter about our choices. / Children who have no control and who are not yet eligible - - to receive a life saving vaccine - - are dying in greater numbers.

Choices about masks and vaccines often seem to revolve around individual rights.

And we adults - - argue and argue - - endlessly...

But being a disciple is about putting others first.

At least that's what Jesus said.

And the choices we make now about how we care for others during this national health crisis - - is one example of what it means to live with our baptism at the center of our lives.

Glaucia Vasconswelos Wilkey tells a story - - of a CHURCH that she was raised in - - that REALLY kept Baptism in the midst of the life of the people.

She was once the national director for worship and liturgy for the Presbyterian Church.

The church of her childhood was just a shack.

BUILT - - OVER - - a creek. / It was positioned so that one corner of the shack was on one side of the creek - - or river - - and one corner was on the other side - - - and the river LITERALLY - - RAN THROUGH it.

The sanctuary was set up so that the creek ran BETWEEN the communion table and the pews. / So - - every time the members took communion - - - someone got their FEET WET - - - and they approached the TABLE of the Lord - - and came into CHRIST'S presence - - - remembering their baptism.

When Jesus was baptized - - he stepped out of the river - -

Jesus stepped - - out of the river Jordan - - and a dove descended on him - -

- - the dove of the HOLY SPIRIT.

Baptism is NOT - - - simply with water.

Baptism is by the HOLY SPIRIT.

Baptism is the SIGN of the BEGINNING of being a disciple.

But it is only a beginning.

Every child begins in a different place - - there is no even playing field.

But every disciple - - and every person - - and every servant - - begins somewhere.

And we all finish - - somewhere else.

Maybe stronger - - maybe not.

But - - if we let the Spirit guide us - - instead of our ambition and greed - - or our fear and hesitation - - IF we let our child guide our adult a bit - - imagine where we would be.

Being a great disciple - - begins somewhere for each one of us.

And...

It could begin RIGHT NOW - - if you really wanted it.