

17th Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 20B
Jeremiah 11:18-20
James 3:13-4:3, 7-8a
Mark 9:30-37

Pastor Melinda J. Wagner
First Immanuel Lutheran Church
Portland, Oregon
September 19, 2021

A friend of mine grew up in a household where children were meant to be seen and not heard. His family was not very warm or affirming, but there was a family down the street who did things differently. Their Italian household was kindhearted and welcoming. When he hung out there as a little boy, the adults took an interest in him, asked about his activities, and they really listened to what he had to say. He felt received and welcomed, felt he really mattered. That neighbor family *centered him* in a powerful way he's never forgotten.

Jesus had something to teach his disciples about *who ought to be centered*. You know what I mean. Who gets the attention. Whose needs get met first. Who matters. In most societies, it's the powerful people who get centered, the rich and influential, the people in charge. And what's so destructive about any unjust society is that only *some* people's needs matter. Only *some* people count. But Jesus came to teach all of us another way of life. A way that *centers* those who need attention the most. A way that rejects domination and replaces it with self-giving compassion.

The disciples were accustomed to *centering themselves*. Even walking with Jesus, they got sidetracked arguing about who was the greatest, who had the most brownie points, who was up and down in the disciple rankings. We play that game pretty often ourselves, driven by insecurity and ego. But Jesus called them out, because this was much more than just a waste of time-- it's the complete opposite of how God's kin-dom works. Following Jesus is not about *centering ourselves*. It's about *centering* the vulnerable ones, the ones without power. It's what Jesus had been doing all along, not ministering with power elites, but with outsiders and outcasts, the sick and wounded, the dying -- people with the greatest need and the least status.

Jesus' actions spoke loudest. He invited a child into the center of that circle of disciples and said: *Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me*. Which was shocking, because children were the least valued human beings in ancient times. The sad fact was that only half the children who were born would live to age six, because of illness and accidents and poverty. They weren't even considered a full person, worthy of respect, until they survived to maturity. Children were nobodies, invisible.

But Jesus said, Put people like this at the *center* of your life and energy, because God's mission is not about preserving your privilege. It's about all people having what they need to live. It's about all people knowing God's love and freeing presence.

As a parent, I see Jesus *centering a child* not as something sentimental, but as a call to action. Here is a little person with needs. They have a runny nose and dirty hands, they're fussy and tired and hungry, they need food and clothes and a safe place to grow up. Who will meet these needs? *Centering a child* means you will never stop taking another person's needs into account. Even in old age, parents still worry about their kids' well-being. Can I get a witness?

Centering another person means your own perspective will never be all that drives you. *Centering another person* means you adjust your actions to honor the other. Even when it costs you – especially then. Because in the reign of God all people matter – and especially the vulnerable ones, especially the ones without power or voice, they matter the most.

The best example I can offer is what's been all over the news this week. The four Olympic gymnasts who testified before Congress about their sexual abuse at the hands of Larry Nassar, the team doctor. Aly Raisman, McKayla Maroney, Maggie Nichols and Simone Biles represent hundreds of girls and young women who were molested, and whose reports of abuse were buried while even more children were fed into Nassar's hands. But what if the well-being of all these girls had been *centered* when it mattered, instead of powerful people trying to talk them out of what they knew, or telling them they must be mistaken, or recording their detailed, painful testimonies then falsifying them. What if these young people were *centered* instead of the institution, the doctor, the reputation of USA gymnastics, or the drive for gold medals. What if *vulnerable lives were put right at the center of concern* instead of centering the donors or sponsors or administrators or the system or the comfort of those in charge.

Centering the powerless will inevitably rock the boat. It will cost money and reputations to make any institution more just. It will make the powerful feel uncomfortably *off-center* because they're used to their own interests being served all the time. But discipleship is not about comfort – it's about seeing what is real and healing what is broken. Jesus calls us to embrace discomfort, for the sake of mercy and courageous love.

This week some groups are raising another significant question: how to *center* the vulnerable people of the world, when it comes to Covid vaccines. Wealthy nations are clamoring for booster shots, while in poor countries the vaccination rate is still in single digits. What would be the cost to us rich and powerful ones, if the poor people of the world were actually to be *centered* in decisions being made right now? The very thought *off-centers* us, doesn't it? To realize we are not automatically entitled to the extra health protection we want. I think I can predict the way the world will solve that question, and I don't believe it will be the way of justice. But for those who are disciples, Jesus is always expanding the scope of our love.

Jesus aims to *de-center* us from our collective egos and *re-center* us on the people who most need God's love and care. Because this is what Jesus came for – to build a new kin-dom where everyone has an equal place at God's table, and relationships are governed by

compassion and justice and mutual care. This new kin-dom is not about privilege and power and success – it's about a compassionate way of life, a way of sacrifice for the sake of others. And it brings an amazing promise.

Jesus says that *when we welcome a child, we welcome Christ. And when we welcome Christ, we welcome God.* That's incredible.

When we *center* a vulnerable person, we are *letting Jesus take center place* in our life. So that when we honor the unimportant and defend the powerless, we draw closer to Jesus and closer to God. It is a kind of mystical communion, a connection right to the heart of God. Living this way, we participate in the reign of love that flows from God into our world. We tap into the divine reality that is always working powerfully to make all of us more human, more compassionate, more courageously loving.

So consider this: We are getting to know God better every time we really listen to those gymnasts, really attend to their pain and their courage, and adjust our actions in response, insisting that any organization we're part of will never cover up that kind of predatory activity, not if we have anything to do with it! We are getting to know God better whenever we let God open our cold, stony hearts to the personal stories of houseless people who are not terrifying but achingly vulnerable, and we respond in some generous way. We are getting to know God better when we *center* people who are experiencing racism and do our best to listen and understand and change in response. We are getting to know God better whenever we help someone, *centering* their needs instead of our own.

It is so very simple, this divine action of helping someone in Christ's name. This means of knowing God and being God's person is available to all of us every single day. You can pray for someone who is in need. You can donate money somewhere positive, or donate household goods to immigrants and refugees, or soap and toothbrushes to Rose Haven. You can place a phone call, or write an email or card, or visit someone who's lonely. You can help a family member. On our day of service last week, some people picked up trash in their neighborhood, some gave blood, someone walked to raise money for cancer research, another baked a pear crisp to give away. We don't have to change the whole world all at once— and yet through even these small, everyday servant acts we do change the world, because we are participating in the revolutionary love of God that is reshaping everything we know.

This is what life with God is truly all about. Receiving the love of Christ, freely given. And sharing this love freely without regard for how it benefits us. Because God moves through the world especially in those places where people come out of themselves, and set aside unhealthy egos, and share generous love. And even today, God is looking for a welcome from us. Through our neighbors, God is calling us into servant love. Thanks be to God. Amen.