

You Are Called to Serve
Series – “Eight Encouraging Words”
Mark 9:30-37
Sunday – September 29
Pastor Vern Christopherson

Back in 1989 I ran into somebody great. No, it wasn't a rock star or a movie star or a sports legend. Being in the business that I'm in, I was much more favorably impressed to meet Herb Chilstrom. In those days, the ELCA was a new church body, and Herb Chilstrom was the newly elected presiding bishop. I'd never met Bishop Chilstrom before, but he was going to be preaching at the closing worship service of one of my dad's last two congregations, St. Peter Lutheran Church in rural Vermillion, South Dakota.

After 120 years on the South Dakota prairie, St. Peter was closing its doors. And it just so happened to be the home congregation of Corrine Chilstrom, the bishop's wife. I went to that service, partly to support my dad and partly out of curiosity. Evidently others had the same curiosity, because – instead of the usual 6-8 people showing up for church, there were 400 worshippers crammed in, plus a half dozen television cameras. With all the excitement, I sincerely doubted I'd even get close to the bishop, let alone get a chance to say hello.

But as good fortune would have it, I looked up while I was in the church basement eating my children dinner, and who would be coming my way but Herb and Corrine Chilstrom. They sat down right beside us. I introduced myself and my family, including my two young children. I was basking in the moment. I was trying to think of something smart or witty to talk about with this great man. But alas, before the Chilstroms had even taken a bite of their food, my six-year-old son Erik promptly dropped a chicken drumstick onto the floor, and it landed right between the bishop's shoes. I tried every which way to nonchalantly slide that drumstick out of the way, but to no avail. The bishop finally looked under the table. He grabbed a napkin, picked up the chicken leg and handed it back across the table. My six-year-old was loving every minute of it – he got his drumstick back – but I was more than a little embarrassed.

I should mention one more detail of my brush with greatness. It happened later that afternoon at the closing worship service. Bishop Chilstrom was preaching. A big part of his sermon focused on the need for followers of Jesus to be the servants they are called to be. “After all,” he said, “that's what kept St. Peter going for the past 120 years.” The bishop acknowledged the faith of

those servants, their determination to work together, their striving to get along even when the way before them was anything but easy or clear. “We’ve long since forgotten many of their names,” he said, “but it was those servants, laboring in the name of Jesus Christ, who had made this place such a tremendous blessing for a world in need.”

Needless to say, I didn’t seek out the bishop after the service was over. But I did leave with a better understanding of greatness. For this newly elected presiding bishop, greatness came first and foremost, not in status, not in some glitzy office building in Chicago, not in the packed pews and the half-dozen television cameras that showed up at St. Peter that day, but in plain and simple serving - maybe even in reaching down and picking up a dropped drumstick for a six-year-old boy.

Jesus and his disciples were on the way to Jerusalem. They were taking the long and winding road because there were many lessons for them to learn. For instance, one day Jesus foreshadowed that he would suffer and die when he got to Jerusalem. Ironically, the disciples soon got caught up in a heated argument over which one of them would be voted the most-likely-to-succeed. Jesus overheard their bickering. He pressed them, “What was all the commotion about?” You can imagine how sheepish they felt. No one could look him in the eye.

Jesus told his disciples to sit down. And he promptly gave them a lesson in leadership: “Whoever wants to be first, must be last of all, and servant of all.” Then he showed them what he meant by taking a little child in his arms. “If you want to be great,” he said, “go and find someone about 28 inches tall, who’s barely begun to walk. Or, go and find a teenager with purple hair and a bit of an attitude. And befriend these young people like it’s the most important job in the whole world.”

I’m sure Jesus caught his disciples off guard. At the time, children were fillers, not the main event. Nobody was shuttling them to football practice and piano lessons. No, they were looked upon as gifts of God who would be of use *someday* – to take over the family business, to look after their parents in their old age, to have children of their own and continue the family name. But in the meantime, they didn’t count for much.

As Jesus follows up on his disciples’ bickering, he cradles the child in his arms. And he encourages them to become small: “Whoever wants to be great must

be last of all and a servant of all. In fact, if you welcome a little child in my name, it will be like you're welcoming me."

So, what is Jesus really saying here? He seems to suggest that you might need to get down on the floor with little Hannah. Get fingerpaints all over your clothes and never mind that you have more important things to do. Never forget that Hannah is not a filler – she's the main event. Opening yourself up to her is every bit as good for your soul as finishing a project or going for a walk or reading the Bible.

Important as this sounds, I think Jesus might be taking this even further. Keep in mind, little Hannah can't buy you anything. She may not remember your name the next time she sees you. She has no status, no influence, just a special greatness in God's eyes. And you can work on your own greatness by learning this simple lesson: it's what you do when you think no one is looking, with someone who can't guarantee a reward, that ushers you into the very presence of God.

I've shared before that I started my pastoral ministry in a small town in Kansas. I quickly discovered that the work of pastoral ministry can be quite taxing. I'd get to the end of the day and want nothing more than a little peace and quiet. And to be honest, there weren't many places to find it. About the only place for me was a large vegetable garden we'd planted in a vacant lot next to the parsonage. There I could weed and hoe to my heart's content.

Then little eight-year-old Christine moved in across the street. And almost every time I went to the garden, Christine would come over to talk to me. "Hello, how are you doing?" she'd ask. "What are you working on. Why are you growing carrots? What's a zucchini?"

I just wanted to weed my zucchini in peace, but Christine wouldn't let me. I might have been imagining it, but when I looked closer, her big brown eyes looked lonely and sad. Even so, I found myself grumbling, "Why couldn't opportunities to serve come at a more convenient time?"

Then one day everything changed, or maybe I should say, I was changed. I was sitting on the front steps. The windows to Christine's house were open wide. I heard her parents get into a loud argument. They were yelling, cursing, and fighting. It was scary and ugly. Sure enough, a few minutes later, the screen

door opened up and eight-year-old Christine came shuffling out the door and across the street. Only this time her big brown eyes were filled with tears. “Hello,” she said, “What are you doing? Are you going to work in the garden today?” And then I knew, Christine was looking for a safe place to be. She was looking for peace and quiet of her own in a crazy, mixed-up world. And spending a little time together in my garden was exactly the right thing to do – both for her and for me.

Friends, I have a feeling Jesus wasn’t talking only about children that day with his disciples. He was talking about any of the little ones in our world: those with no status, with few friends, and little influence. He was picturing an elderly woman in a nursing home with no family coming to visit, a neighbor who keeps to himself much of the time, a teenager who’s struggling with depression.

“If you want to follow me, and even be great,” Jesus tells us, “start by making yourself small. Then go, find one of these little ones, spend time with them, and say hello to me.” Amen.