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Bethel UMC  
July 29, 2018

Mark 9:30-37

<sup>30</sup>They went on from there and passed through Galilee. He did not want anyone to know it; <sup>31</sup>for he was teaching his disciples, saying to them, “The Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him, and three days after being killed, he will rise again.” <sup>32</sup>But they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him.

<sup>33</sup>Then they came to Capernaum; and when he was in the house he asked them, “What were you arguing about on the way?” <sup>34</sup>But they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another who was the greatest. <sup>35</sup>He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, “Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.”

<sup>36</sup>Then he took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms, he said to them,

<sup>37</sup>“Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.”

## WHO ARE YOU?

Everyone at Bethel seems so interested in what I call my “first life” My time spent living and working in New York City as an actress. Several of you commented two weeks how much you enjoyed hearing about my friend Gretchen. SO, today I’d like to tell you about another Manhattan character, my Uncle Jerry.

Jerry is not really my uncle. He’s just a good friend I made at my church in New York. He is an actor, and explores the world in his free time. He's traveled from Africa to China to Brazil. Though he only speaks English, he can fake accents, with great conviction, in several languages, and is willing to start a conversation with anyone, anytime, any where, even if it's entirely in pantomime. Jerry sends out monthly emails with updates on his adventures and I still receive them. I am grateful for technology that keeps me connected to friends through all the years and all the miles.

Well, this summer, while staying in New York, Jerry wrote about all that has disappeared from this majestic city where he grew up and launched his acting career: the 39th Street ferry to Brooklyn, Ebbetts Field, drug addicts on 42d street. The Twin Towers.

The \$165 rent on his 5th floor walk-up – which is now \$3200 per month!

“Once a New Yorker, always a New Yorker,” they say. But Jerry’s email this week made me wonder: can a person still identify themselves as a "New Yorker" when the New York they inhabited is, in a sense, no longer there? When time and the landscape refuse to stand still, is there anything permanent about identity?

Last month, Jerry traveled to Washington, D.C., where he visited the Spy Museum. When you enter, you're asked to create a false identity for yourself. "You choose your "spy" name," Jerry wrote, "the supposed place you were born, the reason you are visiting some city in the world, and several other pertinent pieces of information. All of it must be committed to memory for later testing...to determine your ability to pose as a spy."

After hours of touring the exhibits of spy equipment dating back to 400 B.C., Jerry took the test on his way out. "I thought I was going to do pretty well," he wrote. "Btu, I have to admit however, I failed. Miserably. I would have been shot dead had it been the real thing. At first I felt embarrassed and a little upset.... Then I remembered -- I don't want to be a spy. Ever. For any reason.... Besides, my name just doesn't have the proper ring to it: "My name is ... Fields.... Jerry Fields."

Have you ever played the game of "who are you?" I first encountered it at seminary orientation. It's pretty simple, actually. You just pair off with a partner and take turns asking one another this question -- "who are you?"-- over and over again, until you run out of ways to answer.

Most people begin with their name, then move on to their relationships, their job description, favorite hobbies. I am Julie. I am a mother, a wife, a minister, an avid reader, a retired tap dancer. I know all of our youth play this game in a more technologically advanced way, on internet networking sites like snapchat, instagram, twitter, and facebook. Social Media sites each have a personal profile where you have to define WHO YOU ARE.

So anyways, when you're playing this game in person it usually doesn't take more than 20 repeats of the question before most of us run out of ways of defining ourselves in terms of external things - labels that depend on our relationship with people, places, and activities. Many people find this point a bit uncomfortable -- like going back to a place where you once lived only to discover that you no longer know your way around. I feel like this every time I go visit my mom in Irmo – Harbison Boulevard was a 2-lane side road with one gas station when our family moved there 32 years ago!

More seriously, it is sometimes distressing to find that the labels that once defined our identity have now changed their meaning, or fallen off completely: "husband of..." or "daughter of..." "member of..." or "employee of..." Or trying to adapt to new labels like "college student", "widow", "retiree" - or as Jerry calls himself, "Medicare honoree." Of course, the point of the "who are you?" game is to rattle us a bit, get us thinking about our identity beyond the labels constructed of external things like geography, relationships, and job titles.

Which brings us to the twelve disciples in today's scripture. In Mark's gospel, much of the action takes place while Jesus and his disciples are "on the road," moving toward Jesus' final days in Jerusalem. All along the way, Jesus tries to point out the real landscape they're passing through - the realm of God that

is all around them, but which, most of the time, they fail to see. All along the way, Jesus tries to teach them something about their own true nature, what is permanent and what is transient.

At this point in the Gospel of Mark, the disciples and Jesus are on their way home from their journey through Caesarea Philippi. They're headed home to familiar territory, where most of them grew up. Maybe because they want to impress the folks back home -- the disciples begin arguing among themselves over who will get to wear the label "greatest disciple of Jesus."

Jesus (who surely overhears them!) doesn't say a word until they get home. But then, he sits down and tells them in no uncertain terms what he meant by his prediction, and what it means for them: "Whoever wants to be first, must be last of all and servant of all." And then, to demonstrate, he takes up a little child into his arms. We don't know if it was a boy or a girl, of what age or status in the household. But Jesus' action would have startled his male disciples. In that time and place, a child was essentially invisible in the world of men and important ideas; a person with "no labels attached," a child was someone who could be, and usually was, overlooked, invisible.

But now Jesus makes another one of his astounding claims: this insignificant child is actually a stand-in for Jesus! . . .and not just for him, but for "the one who sent him." Instead of arguing over who's the greatest, he says, you should welcome this child as you would welcome me, as you would welcome God.

It's hard to come up with a statement today that would have the same shock value. Perhaps if we as a church were to say that, from now on, our entire budget will be spent on Children's Sunday School, a family food pantry and creating a children's clothing closet here at the church. We are going to spend \$361,000 dollars a year on our KIDS, because we are going to take Jesus's call to care for the children seriously – to take seriously our Biblical mandate to feed the hungry, clothe the naked and care for the sick. Because that is what the Gospel of Mark is telling us! This is what Jesus requires. And because we want to make sure Jesus knows he's welcome here at Bethel United Methodist Church? Who's on board for this? ? ?

Or perhaps if the President and Congress were to announce tomorrow that, say 11% of the discretionary funding in the federal budget (roughly \$108 billion) was to be immediately re-directed to provide vaccines, clean water and medical care for every child in every nation on the entire planet, because they'd suddenly realized (while sitting in church or synagogue this weekend) that that's what it really means to be the world's sole remaining superpower? Can you imagine?

However the disciples' reacted to Jesus' highly unrealistic proposal, clearly it shocked them right out of their argument over who would get to wear the label "super-disciple," and "greatest follower of Jesus." But did he mean only to shock them or shame them?

I think Jesus was also saying something else to the disciples. Something like, "No, no, no, you're framing the question all wrong! The really important question is not, 'who is the greatest?' The kingdom of God is here, right now, under your noses, and the most important question for you to ask yourself in this new landscape is "who am I?""

While in Winnsboro, I attended a workshop on spirituality in the workplace, I heard a woman, who happened to be a lawyer, describe how she felt everyday as the elevator doors opened on her office floor. She said she felt pressured at that moment to transform from her real self (a wife, mother, daughter, friend) into a kind of Super-woman: super-smart, super-immune to pain, super-unemotional. And it's not just lawyers in our culture who feel this pressure, either - just ask any of those Super-moms sitting out there in the pews. :)

In the classic movie "All That Jazz," the character based on the late choreographer, Bob Fosse, finds himself spiraling toward death, even courting death's release, because of over-work, addiction and alienation from his loved ones. But every morning, he gets up, shaves, dresses, and pops a few pills. Then, as the last act in the ritual, he looks at himself in the mirror, and, says, full of false bravado, "It's show time folks."

Maybe when Jesus lifted that child onto his lap, he was trying to tell the disciples this:

- To find out who you really are,
- Remove all the labels that have gotten stuck onto your ego like post-it notes and sewn onto your soul like fabric-care labels.
- Scrub off the labels that come from the visible realm of everyday struggle and ambition.
- Tear away the labels that depend on things outside of you --
  - who your ancestors were,
  - where you live and work,
  - what church you go to,
  - what you're addicted to,
  - all your accomplishments and failures.
- Now ask yourself, "What's left? Who am I ...really?"

By identifying himself with the little child, saying, welcome her and you welcome me, Jesus pointed once again directly to the Kingdom of God he was sent to reveal. He posed the question and pointed to the answer at the same time: this is who you are, each and every one of you, no more and no less than this -- a beloved child of God.

When age or disease have taken away some of your labels;

When divorce or the emptying of the nest have taken away more of your labels;

When achievement and disappointment both turn out to lead to the same dry place in the road,

Jesus said, the final answer to the question, "who am I?" is this - you are a child held in the lap of God, welcome, secure and accepted.

And, of course, the challenging other side of the lesson is this: "so is everyone else you meet." And when you welcome them and serve them, especially the most vulnerable and overlooked, Jesus says you will be welcoming me, and not just me, but the one who sent me.

My friends, when you know your true identity, even during times of loss, fear, or suffering, it gives you an indelible new lease on life, a new freedom - a resurrection, you might say.

- No need to move through the world like a spy trying to remember the details of your made-up identity.
- No need to get ready for "show time."
- No need to put on your Super-man or Super-woman suit.
- No need to worry about greatness, getting it, keeping it, proving it to the world.

The only need is to recognize the truth - that the Kingdom of God is right here, right now, as near as the next person you meet, as intimate as the invitation you give that person to cross into the threshold of your heart.

When that happens, we travel together to a whole new place. With open hearts, open minds, and open doors, we journey together as beloved children of God. May it be so. Amen.

LET US PRAY: Jesus my friend, thank You for teaching me the way of love, the way of the servant. Heal my ears today that I might hear you, and tune my heart so that it might seek You. Encourage me by Your holy example to be the servant of all, and give me strength to serve in the way you've asked me to serve today. Amen.