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Mark 9:30-37
Jeremiah 11:18-20
Psalm 54
James 3:13-4:3,7-8

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The Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost

My grandmother. She wasn't known for her storytelling skills - at least she never told magical stories about the greatest love of her life. She didn't have tales about wild adventures to faraway places. She didn't talk about aspirations or accomplishments or other important achievements. But there was one story that always fascinated me as a little girl and it would come up every time we had fried chicken. I noticed that Grandmother always took the chicken leg even when there were much better pieces in the KFC bucket. I would often ask her – grandmother – why do you always eat those boney pieces of chicken? And she would follow by telling me about Sunday dinner at her home when she was little.

My grandmother came from a deeply religious southern mill town family and on Sundays it was the custom to invite the preacher over. The adults were always serious, dressed in their Sunday best. There were the relatives that always got a bad rap like her grumpy sister, Kate, and her crazy cousin, Martha. And, of course, there was food...lots of food...and there was always fried chicken.

Back in those days, there were two rules that Grandmother would recall. The first – the children were to be silent so as not to disturb the adults...especially the preacher who apparently had very important things to talk about. The second – the children could not eat until the adults were done. There was no priority seating for kids. No one was worried if they were hungry. They simply had to wait patiently until the adults were done and then they could come to the table to eat what was left.

However, the only thing that was ever left were the chicken legs.

And somehow, even as she got older and could have eaten any piece of chicken she wanted, she always opted for those boney chicken legs....And she always offered the best pieces to everyone else.

Maybe that is what my grandmother was trying to teach me every time she told me her story. That sometimes, like when she was a kid, those times of waiting, of making the best out of what we are given, helps us gain a more appreciative way to live as we get older. That it's not always about having the most or the best or even having the thing we think we deserve. And, as in my grandmother's case, when we stop grasping for the big juicy piece of chicken we realize that we have a lot to share with others.

And so I find the story of Jesus with the child on his lap an interesting, if not frustrating, image of childhood innocence and goodness. Or maybe I am a little annoyed at our often sweet and cuddly interpretation of this passage. Because being a child in biblical times (or my

grandmother's time) was not easy. It wasn't serene and it wasn't innocent and it certainly wasn't cuddly. Children in those days had little if any rights. They were utterly dependent and vulnerable. Children weren't on the pedestal that we often put them on today. They lived by all accounts a very difficult life. So what in the world would Jesus mean when he uses a child as an example of what it means to welcome and follow Jesus?

I have a sneaky suspicion that what Jesus is trying to teach has more to do with how we orient ourselves in the world than with actually taking time to spend with kids (although that is certainly a bonus). What Jesus is saying is to walk in the steps of this child - this child who had little if any rights or opportunities, who had to wait for everything and hope that at the end of the day he would have enough. Walk in this child's steps and see what new perspective you might gain.

So we must ask...What might the world look like if you didn't have choices? What if you had no ability to lead or get ahead? How would you understand the world if you had to rely on others to provide your every need? It's certainly not how most of us would choose to live. We strive to be better, to be greater. But, Jesus wants us to see the world from another vantage point – not our chosen view but the view from those individuals who struggle to simply get by.

How might our perspective on opportunity or ability or power change?

Our reading from James describes this altered kind of perspective, this willingness to see things differently as integral to godly leadership. That when we put aside selfish ambition, when we put aside trying to be the greatest, we begin to gain wisdom that only comes from qualities like gentleness, the ability to yield to the needs of others, to have mercy, to promote peace and equality. Things that cannot emerge if we never take the time to walk in someone else's shoes or listen to what life is like for them.

And so, when the disciples are arguing about who is the greatest, who is first, who gets the best...Jesus provides a course correction. No...he says...you've got the argument all wrong. Walk in the steps of this child. Learn what it means to not be the greatest but to live from a place of compassion and service because you have taken the time to understand what others are going through.

What might that look like for you? I think the only way to help us get our head around this teaching is to break it down in steps.

First, start by being willing to listen. Listen to experiences that are not your own. Listen with an open heart and an open mind. Don't be so quick to discredit what someone else is going through. Just listen. That doesn't come easy in our world today. We are so divided and defensive. We want to be right and we want everyone else to be wrong. Every time I turn on the news – all I hear is people trying to discredit one another. Folks, if we are ever going to change that dynamic, we have to start by listening. Put aside your need to be heard in this moment so that others can be heard.

Second, consider what you hear. You might not agree. You might not understand. Because it won't be your experience. In a world that wants to point fingers at those who speak up for an injustice they have lived through, who speak up for an abuse they have experienced or the hunger they have endured, don't turn away. Consider what their experience is like because their experience is real and true for them.

Finally, be willing to act. Be willing to say...I haven't experienced what you have but I can walk with you as you strive to overcome what life has thrown at you. I haven't known your pain or your silence but I am with you now...to make sure that your pain doesn't continue. So, in following Jesus' example, we allow ourselves to be fully present to those around us in need, to speak up, to stand up for something greater than ourselves. To put aside our needs in the moment and make sure that others have what they need.

Looking back on my grandmother's story, I don't think that my great grandfather set out to teach her these lessons of listening, considering, and acting when she had to wait for her food on those Sunday afternoons. But somehow, I think that is what she learned...the value of humility and of the willingness to give back to others. It became part of who she was. It's taken me a long time to learn what she was teaching me each time she told me that story. And, no, I don't like chicken legs to this day but her lesson stands as something so much bigger than that Sunday meal. It was the simple lesson that by loving Jesus and loving one another, we can ensure that each person has what they need to thrive...even if we have to wait a little while for what we need.

Amen.