

September 24, 2006 Mark 9:30-37

by Douglas Harding

Recently I attended an event for United Methodist Clergy. Our speaker told a story from his early days as a pastor. A new church asked if he visited. That seems to be a common concern of churches, they want their pastors to visit in the home. And Wesley expected Methodist Clergy to visit in the homes. Our speaker told us he said yes, that he visited, but they should be prepared for each visit to be done in the spirit of John Wesley's view on visiting. For he would come to their homes to do four things.

- 1) Ask the classic Wesley question "How is it with your soul?" Those being visited should be prepared to discuss their spirituality.
- 2) He would inquire about their bible reading and be ready to assist with any questions or the understanding of difficult passages.
- 3) Time will be allowed to discuss the sermons and he would be ready to clarify any points not understood.
- 4) And he would ask to meet with the children, separately, to ask how they were being instructed in the Christian Life by their parents.

Upon laying out his four step agenda he found he was never again asked about visiting.

Now visiting is certainly a concern in local churches and a task not always well done by clergy. And it merits further discussion, at another time. What intrigued me was the final question, "are the children being instructed in the Christian life by their parents."

If I were to knock on your door and you knew I would be asking that question, would you even let me in? Or are you like many who have turned that task over to others, others hopefully being the Sunday school teachers and your pastor?

Our Gospel lesson tells us:

Then Jesus had a child stand near him. He put his arm around the child and said, "When you welcome even a child because of me, you welcome me. And when you welcome me, you welcome the one who sent me."

A nice sentiment, but what was the context? Jesus confronts his disciples about their argument over who among them was the greatest. He made a statement and then gave an example.

We probably don't have too much trouble understanding the statement, but without knowing something of the times, we may miss altogether the point of the example.

In that culture, children were essentially non-persons. They were left with the women, who themselves were considered subservient to the men, but children were even further down the social ladder. Only slaves were lower in social standing than children.

To say that the followers of Jesus could welcome him by welcoming a child was a mind-blowing suggestion. But Jesus wanted them to understand how God viewed greatness. It came not from being high on society's status ladder, but by welcoming those on the bottom rungs or those who don't have a place on the ladder at all.

Jesus spoke about greatness and then used welcoming a child as an example of what it means to be great in the kingdom of God - as an example of what it means to welcome **him**.

Children symbolized the poor, the lowly of whom Jesus speaks in the Beatitudes in his Sermon on the Mount - "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." (Matthew 5:2-12). Jesus talks about the greatness of serving. Then he calls a child to him. His words are about how one should receive, how one should treat "one such child" or one "like this child."

We need to remember that by receiving or welcoming children Jesus means anyone who needs help, and specifically those who are new disciples. So how are we to treat the "children" of the world? Well to get back to Wesley's concern, we are to teach, to instruct them in the Christian Life. To show by example.

And that we have not been doing very well. Pollster George Gallup Jr. has long referred to America as a "nation of biblical illiterates." Only four in 10 Americans know that Jesus delivered the Sermon on the Mount. A majority of citizens cannot name the four Gospels of the New Testament. Only three in 10 teenagers know why Easter is celebrated. Two-thirds of Americans believe there are few, if any, absolute principles to direct human behavior. A poll by the Barna Research Group suggested that religious illiteracy has increased. For example, three out of four Americans (and nearly half of "born-again" Christians) believe the Bible teaches that "God helps those who help themselves." George Barna argues that self-reliance is not only not scriptural, but that it contradicts revelation. Only God determines a person's destiny, the pollster notes. To believe otherwise "exposes our false theological cornerstone - that we are the center of things, that it is up to us to determine our destiny, and that God is merely our assistant ..."

A similar number of born-again Christians deny the existence of the Holy Spirit and Satan. One in five denies Jesus' physical resurrection and believes he was a sinner.

Earlier surveys of mainline Protestants revealed that barely half of Lutherans, Methodists, and Presbyterians believe in the devil, but 56 percent of Lutherans and 49 percent of Methodists believe in UFOs. One-third of Methodists and Presbyterians have faith in astrology. While nearly three-fourths of all Americans believe in hell, hardly any believe it to be their likely destination in eternity.

This Barna poll is intended to help Christian pastors and groups focus their ministries. The sheer number of "errant theological positions" among believers underscores "the magnitude of the challenge facing churches today," Barna notes.

University of Wisconsin historian Thomas Reeves indicts popular religious belief and service. "Christianity in modern America is, in large part, innocuous," he writes. "It tends to be easy, upbeat, convenient, and compatible. It does not require self-sacrifice, discipline, humility, an otherworldly outlook, a zeal for souls, a fear as well as love of God. There is little guilt and no punishment, and the payoff in heaven is virtually certain."

Former Secretary of Education William Bennett concludes that "We have become the kind of society that civilized countries used to send missionaries to."

David Yount writes "These are harsh judgments. Perhaps we have been so busy pursuing the American Dream of the good life that we have neglected to nurture the faith on which the Dream is founded. If so, our only fault is inattention. If at the millennium our common faith has faltered, or has shriveled for lack of nourishment, or has been supplanted by sentimentality, at least we have not succumbed to cynicism. Faith has not been lost, only misplaced. As a people, we can retrieve it together.

Scholars tell us that Jesus selected a child as a way of saying to the disciples that they were to serve those who were helpless, those who could not help themselves, regardless of their age. This is how we best serve God--by serving the least and the lowest.

Here is how to make your life count. Find a place where you can serve. It may be in your work. It may be here in our church. But you will never be happy or truly successful until you see that we are here to serve, not to be served. To serve others, particularly the least and the lowest, is the best way to serve God.