

September 19, 2021
Lectionary 25, Year B
The Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost
Mark 9:30-37
Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Norwood, MA
Pastor Amanda L. Warner

Leading Roles

The email arrived on Wednesday. As you might know, since I've talked about it a lot this summer and this past week, my three older kids, Abigail, Julia, and John are in the Norwood Middle and High School musical, *The Wizard of Oz* this weekend.

Last Wednesday was the final rehearsal before opening night and that's when I got this email:

Can you believe it? Only two more sleeps until our children transport us to the Yellow Brick Road!

However, in order to make it happen, we have a request. We need volunteers. The kids are awesome but they need some help and guidance backstage. There are countless costume changes and while they are pretty fantastic, time is not always on their side. The Drama Mamas have been supporting all the kids during rehearsals all summer, but half of the Drama Mamas are senior parents. We would like for the senior parents to be able to watch the show, as it will be the last for them. The only way they/we can do this is if we have some other parents take our places backstage.

So, we are hoping that you will volunteer. Friday and Saturday from 5-9:30 and Sunday from 1-5:30. Any time you can give. Any show. Please consider putting yourself out there. Your willingness to volunteer means memories for the parents who have given their time these past months to help all our kids. Please let me know if you can help and we'll see you in Emerald City!

I read that email and felt her desperation in my gut. I felt the number of times that I have sent out emails like that. We need help, please help, emails. I thought, well, if I'm going to send those kinds of emails, hoping and praying that someone will respond with the kind of help that I need, that the church needs, then I had better respond to this request for help.

In the interests of full disclosure and honesty from the pulpit, I didn't really want to do it.

My main reason for not wanting to do it was that I wanted to watch all three performances of the show. After all, three of my kids have spent their summer rehearsing for this, working hard. I wanted to see as much of the fruits of their labor as I possibly could. I had tickets for all three performances of the show.

But my parents were going to be in the audience on Saturday night, and, Britton and Cyrus, and some friends, from Emmanuel and from town, so I knew that my kids would have a lot of people out there in the audience rooting for them.

Of course, I wanted to see the show, but so did the other moms who had been working tirelessly, all summer, to help with this production. I figured that it was only right that I give them a chance to see the fruit of their and their kids' labors for at least one performance of the show.

The other reason I didn't want to do it, was because I didn't know what "it" was. I didn't know what, specifically, I would be expected to do, and I certainly didn't want to be the reason that something went wrong in the show. But I also figured that they wouldn't be asking parents who had never done it before for help if it was something that the parents couldn't figure out pretty quickly and easily.

So, I replied to the email and volunteered, and was assured that there would be an experienced Drama Mama backstage to show me the ropes.

I showed up backstage at 5:00 as I had been asked to do.

It was a theater wonderland. Props and scenery laid out in very specific order. Racks and racks of costumes, hats, dresses, pants, vests, shirts, and of course, a table just for costume coordinated masks for the kids to wear, since they had to wear masks for the performance.

My job would be to help kids who needed it with their quick costume changes. Making sure that they had the right color mask on, helping them get their hats secured with bobby pins, straightening collars, tightening ties, reattaching microphones, hanging up clothes, helping them find things, as needed, and in general, being there in case a crisis arose.

Some of the kids had 5 or more costume changes, in the show, some of which had to be done in about two minutes. It was good to have helpers there.

Like I said, I didn't want to do it. I volunteered out of a sense of obligation, because I felt that it was just the right thing to do. But I'm so glad that I did.

As much as I missed seeing the show from the "front", it was an amazing and beautiful thing to see the show from backstage. That summer of rehearsal and hard work paid off, not just onstage, but also back stage, as the kids worked together to put on a great show.

While I was back there, with some other moms, to help with the costume changes, we were often not needed.

First of all, the kids knew what they were doing and didn't need that much help. Also, when they did need help, they helped each other.

And here's what really struck me. As in any show, there were, of course, people who had leading roles. Most of you have probably seen the movie version of *The Wizard of Oz*. If I asked you, you could probably name the leads in that show. You'd probably mention Dorothy, the Scarecrow, the Tinman, and the Lion. You might also name the Wicked Witch of the West, and Glinda, the good witch of the North, and the Wizard of Oz himself.

Some of those lead characters, Dorothy and the Scarecrow, and the Tinman, and the Lion, are onstage for most of the show, but other leads had time in-between the scenes that they were in.

So, the actors who were playing those leading characters, the ones who had time between their scenes, instead of keeping to themselves and focusing on their own performances, helped out with the costume changes for the members of the ensemble. They did a lot of what I had been asked to do as a Drama Mama, zipping dresses, helping people find hats, and get the right color masks.

The people who had leading roles seemed to understand that everyone's part was important, that the show was a sum of its parts, and that it was just as important that the members of the ensemble get onstage on time and with the right costume as it was that they did as a leading character.

So, seeing this, this beautiful expression of so many people working together to create something wonderful, I got to thinking about our gospel reading for today.

Then [Jesus and his disciples] came to Capernaum; and when he was in the house he asked [the disciples], "What were you arguing about on the way?" But they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another who was the greatest (Mark 9:33-34).

Right before this interaction, Jesus had been telling his disciples about where his road, where his life was taking him.

The beginning of our gospel reading for today says that Jesus was walking along teaching his disciples, telling 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" (Mark 9:31b).

The text tells us that Jesus was trying to travel inconspicuously, because he wanted to have some time to teach his disciples, to prepare them for what was to come.

But the text also tells us that that they didn't understand what he was talking about, the idea that he was going to be betrayed, that he was going to be killed.

They couldn't imagine and probably didn't want to believe that their teacher, their friend, who they had seen wield such extraordinary power, could possibly meet such a horrible end, betrayal and suffering and death, at the hands of earthy powers.

They also couldn't understand, and didn't even know how to imagine what Jesus was talking about when Jesus talked about rising again in three days. The disciples, believed, no, they knew, that death was death and it was final. It was an ending; it was the ending. The idea of someone rising from the dead was as mysterious to them as the idea that the man, the person, the teacher, who they called Lord, could die a horrible death, putting an end to all of their hopes.

And so, the text says, "They did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him" (Mark 9:32).

Instead, they turned to talking about something that they could understand.

The disciples, Jesus' twelve closest friends, heard Jesus talk about his own sacrifice, his own suffering, his own death, and instead of reflecting on that or even asking him more about it, they turned to talking, no, arguing, about which one of them was Jesus' favorite, which one was the most faithful disciple, which one was the greatest.

Can you imagine what that conversation might have been like? Each of them casting their credentials before each other. "I was the one who first called Jesus the messiah!"

"Yes, but then you argued with Jesus and he called you Satan!"

"I was one of the ones who got to witness the transfiguration!"

“I was the one who found the five loaves and two fish for Jesus to use for his miracle.”

And so on and so on....

Who was most important, who was the favorite, who was the greatest?

They weren't talking about how they could follow Jesus on his road of self-sacrifice. Instead, they all wanted to be the leading man in what they hoped, what they imagined, would be Jesus' triumphant story.

Of course, it made no sense to them at all, that that story would include any kind of suffering, or being placed into the power of earthly rulers, or certainly dying.

But Jesus sat down, gathered his disciples around him, and told them, “Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all” (Mark 9:35b)

In other words, you do not get to be great in God's sight, by talking up your credentials, or your achievements, or by trying to raise your worldly status.

Instead, you gain greatness in the kingdom of God by being a servant, by lifting others up, instead of seeking to glorify yourself.

And then Jesus took a child in his arms and told his disciples, “Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me” (Mark 9:37).

Of course, we live in a culture, which, ideally, cherishes, protects, and celebrates children, but in Jesus' time and sadly, often in our own, children were and are powerless, at the mercy or lack thereof, of the adults in their lives, and treated with contempt, disdain, and all too often, abuse.

So, Jesus was telling his disciples, that those who should be welcomed and cherished were not those who the world calls great, but the ones who are considered to be the last and the least.

The greatness of someone is not found in their worldly accomplishments or in their connection with influential or famous people, but in the way that they treat

those who the world has labelled as “beneath them”. Greatness is found in how we welcome the weak and vulnerable in our communities and how we lift others up.

What I saw backstage at *The Wizard of Oz*, was many who had been chosen to be the greatest among the cast, the leads, the stars of the show, living out Jesus’ words, being servants of all.

Glinda running in her gown to get someone’s fuzzy Winkie hat, the Witch helping someone button a vest or clipping a microphone onto a poppy, or straightening a snowman’s tie, and everyone working together and helping each other to create something wonderful.

I reluctantly went backstage, to help, out of a sense of obligation, because I thought it was my duty, that it was the right thing to do. And it probably was.

But what a surprise, and what a blessing it was to discover once I got there Jesus waiting for me there.

To find the words of Jesus come to life, in a parable of service, reminding me: “Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all” (Mark 9:35b). Amen.