

“Role Reversal”
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana
September 23, 2012

Mark 9: 30-37

As Americans, we are a funny, peculiar lot. We are a country founded on principles of individual freedom, representative government, and protection from tyranny. And yet, sometimes those very principles tend to cancel one another out.

I’m observing that right now in the neighborhood in which we live. There is a lot of land for sale, probably 3-4 acres, which is not within our neighborhood’s boundaries, but is across the street from the primary entrance to our neighborhood. The land has been sold to a Jehovah’s Witness congregation, but requires rezoning for the church to build on it.

Well, as Americans, we are a people who fiercely defend the right to worship freely. That is, as long as it doesn’t infringe on our right to own our property and the supposed privileges which come with that ownership.

As you might infer from my sarcasm, the large majority of people in our neighborhood are not in favor of this congregation buying the land and building on it. A meeting was held recently with the neighborhood association, and a representative from the congregation was present. It was probably good that Debbie went instead of me, because I would have lost my cool with people in our neighborhood. People complained about increased traffic and decreased property values, and it was clear that an overwhelming majority wish for the neighborhood association to fight the rezoning. However, what people don’t realize is that the current zoning is for a higher density of residences per acre than what the church is requesting. In other words, if the church doesn’t build, the seller could sell the land for apartments, and there would be more traffic, people, etc., than what the church would bring.

Whatever ends up happening, a couple of things have struck me. One is how grateful I am that our neighbors around John Knox never expressed concern or opposition to the construction we engaged in a few years ago. We had to go through the same rezoning process, and any of our neighbors could have raised questions, delayed or fought our planning and building process. Perhaps that reflects how people perceive our congregation in this community, or reflects how we sought to be transparent with the community on what we planned to do. Whatever the case, I feel very fortunate for the cooperation we received from our neighbors when we built this new space.

The second thing which has struck me about this process in our neighborhood is how we as human beings have an uncanny ability to believe we know what is in our best interest, even when it probably is not. Our neighbors see anything which is a change from the norm as threatening, and

are fighting to preserve the status quo. What they don't realize is that this change might not be such a bad thing, and in fact, if the church is defeated, the end result might be even worse.

As humans, we are excellent at jumping to conclusions, believing we are the best judge of who is right and wrong, what is best and what is not. As humans, we are excellent at seeking to measure ourselves against one another, and in so doing, finding our self-worth tied-up in those comparisons. As humans, whether in the 21-century world of today, or the first-century world of Jesus, it can be hard to truly understand what God wishes for us as his children, especially when those wishes run counter to our perceptions.

In this morning's passage, we have another example of the disciples struggling to understand what Jesus is saying. To begin, Jesus tells them that "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." What did they do? "They did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him" (9:31-32). It's the second time he has tried to prepare them for what is coming, but they don't want to hear the truth. They want to believe that Jerusalem is full of exultation and victory, and they can't wait to see where they will rank in Jesus' reign. Once again, though, they just don't get it.

Brian Stoffregen writes: *What does it mean "to be better" than another? We can test some ways of being "better." A footrace can determine the better runner. A test can determine who knows more or can do more. Contests are held to determine the better boxer, wrestler, or martial arts specialist. Grades are given in school that determine the better students. The list could go on and on, but does doing something better than another person make one better than another? Unfortunately we often say or think that. We win a contest, so we think, I'm better than those others. Or, which is more common, we don't win the contest, so we think, "Since I didn't win, I must be a terrible person. I'm no good"* (www.crossmarks.com/brian/mark9x30.htm).

Is that what was going through the disciples' heads? "Did I pass the test? Did I win the competition? Will I be his favorite? Who is the winner? Who is the loser?" And when Jesus turns around and asks them, "What were you arguing about on the way?" all they can do is stare back in silence. They are embarrassed, they are afraid, they are ashamed. But in Mark's account, they never said a word – Jesus read their minds. He knew what they were discussing, knew what they were thinking, and knew they just didn't get it.

As one commentator notes: *It is not always easy to know whether it is a time for silence or a time for speaking. Sometimes we talk too much and try to dominate a situation in which we should be more open to the views and needs of others; sometimes we are silent when we should speak out in opposition to injustice or evil. Sometimes we speak when we do not really know what we are talking about; sometimes we hesitate when we could offer a word of comfort or support or insight.*

It is hard to imagine that the disciples had so little understanding of what Jesus had been saying to them that they were arguing about which of them was the greatest. It is hard to imagine that, at least, until we realize how often we would be silent if Jesus were to confront us and ask us what we have been talking and fretting about. Some of us spend a lot of time worrying about our status, trying to get the symbols of prestige, and seeking to maneuver so that we get the acclaim. Many of us would fall silent if we were asked to explain how what we are doing and saying accords with the way of life that Jesus sets before us.

In this passage, Jesus tells them that if they want to live in the way of one who gives his life for others, they will identify with the children and welcome them, for they are in need of love and protection. We are truly significant when we welcome Jesus in the child who finds comfort and aid and security in the arms in which we enfold her (*Feasting on the Word, Year B, Volume 4, Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville, © 2009: 94-96*).

Jesus' message of hospitality was challenging to the disciples, and it's still challenging to us. We think that we need to measure our success and status as Christians by how many are in worship, or how much time we spend doing all the right things. We believe we know the people God wants to be with us, how God wants us to serve, and which of our priorities God thinks is most important. We compete with one another – just as the disciples did – and we fail to see the object lesson sitting on Jesus' lap.

You know, it's fine to sit out there and say, "What is the church going to do for me?" It's fine to be comfortable, to assume the church will be there whenever you need it, and to come whenever it's convenient for us. It's fine to believe that we've welcomed everyone we need to welcome into our fellowship, and we can be at ease about our future. It is fine to think that way – but that is when you will miss the role reversal which God has brought into our lives.

You will miss the one sent by the One you claim to worship. You will miss the one who loves you more than life itself, so that you can feel welcomed into his fellowship. You will miss the one who has seen you when you felt invisible, and brought you up from the lowly place you were in. It is fine to think you have done enough to be the best in God's eyes – but you will miss the chance to welcome Christ the way he has welcomed you.

"Whoever welcomes the least among you welcomes me," Jesus said. Go and do likewise.

Thanks be to God. Amen.