

Your Love? Nah, Jesus Want More – Mark 9: 30-37
Sermon prepared and preached by Rev. Don Hammond
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A part of church life that very few of you get the opportunity to see is something that happens regularly beyond the Sunday morning worship. Frequently someone either calls or comes to the church with a plea for financial help. The plea for help varies from food, gasoline, and utilities, to rent. We have some limited resources provided in the budget but we need to be careful with the money. Because that money is all we will have available for the entire year, we must, unfortunately, choose how to best use it. We never give cash, and, when helping with something like utilities, we send the money directly to the utility company.

What I believe we receive more requests for than any other is rent help. Unfortunately we needed to adapt a policy that does not give our resources for rent. Quite frankly, we don't have that kind of money, but we do know to where we can refer people for possible help. These are needs that I have had to face all my years as a pastor, and it is both difficult and painful to tell someone that we are unable to help that way.

While I was the settled pastor in Renton, Washington, I began to do some writing of stories that unfolded in front of my eyes. The writing began during a summer when I was asked to fill-in as a volunteer police chaplain, while the primary volunteer chaplain went on sabbaticals. He told me it would be a low-demand, easy function to fill. He and I have had very few words since. I wrote about many of the situations I found myself in, and allowed that writing to overflow from even non-chaplain experiences. This morning I would like to read to you one of my written accounts.

She was waiting for me at the church on Monday morning. She sat on the front steps. I invited her inside and into the office and there we talked. For some reason my eyes were drawn to her hands. They were swollen, red, cold, and dirty. She must have noticed my glances and then spoke embarrassingly about the dirt under her nails. Then, with an overused tissue, she blew her nose, "getting a cold," she said.

Her clothes matched her fingernails. Her long brown hair seemed clean, which puzzled me, but she desperately needed a shower! I offered her a cup of hot coffee. She not only accepted it, but also embraced it as though it was some great treasure.

In time she said, "my husband is outside – he is ashamed to come in." I thought he too might want a cup of hot coffee and an invitation to come into the warm building.

Both of them were probably in their late 30s, but their condition may have deceived my ability to guess their ages. They had been living in the woods that surrounded the church building. They had one change of clothes, also dirty, a blanket, and no food. She said, "We have not eaten all weekend." She went on, and told me their good fortune was that their 15 year old son was being cared for by some family.

I had no resources to help them. I began to telephone agency after agency, and found no other help for housing. I could feed them and give them some money to wash their clothes at the corner Laundromat, I thought. There was no shower in the building for them to bathe. The best we had was a washbasin in the bathroom, and they seemed glad for that. I went to the nearby grocery store for food.

When I returned he was asleep on the chair in my office. I set the table with fried chicken, beans, salad, bread, and milk. I bought enough for leftovers. I could feel their discomfort or perhaps pride at eating, but I knew they were hungry because they had not eaten all weekend. They ate in the next room, and I could hear the reckless noises of their eating. Clearly, they were hungry.

Initially, I thought of them as interference to my plans for the day. I had other important matters that I planned to attend to. Listening to them eat, I began to wonder if there were others living in the woods, hungry, embarrassed, especially for their son. Then I began to wonder why this was happening, and why there were no resources available.

They ate everything! Then, carrying a plastic bag of dirty clothes, they slowly walked off in the cold day. Their big plan of the day was probably to do laundry.

Burned into my memory, I fear forever, is them walking down the sidewalk, backs bent forward, heads lowered, and looking defeated. I wonder if anyone will notice them? After all, they are not the kind of people that other people want to notice.

Jesus was in the room and his disciples were feeling full of themselves. They were important, so they thought. Among themselves, without including Jesus, they debated over which of them was the greatest and who would be the right and left hand men of Jesus. Jesus, being smarter than they gave him credit for being, said, “what are you fellas talking about?” “Oh, nothing just some good theological discourse.” Meanwhile, there is a little kid in the room. You know how it is with children - they wander around and often get into your way. Sometimes they nearly get stepped on, and they can even become an obstacle that can become annoying. You probably know what this is like. I bet many here have at some time said to some little one “why don’t you go into the other room or outside and play?” It can be difficult to have an adult conversation, especially about important theological matters, when children get into the way. That is what was going on in that room.

Jesus calls the child to him, holds the child up, and asks the disciples “how many of you even noticed this little one, much less took time to get down onto the floor and play or talk with him? Not a one!” This is not the kind of person that other people often notice.

There it is. If you want to know what Jesus wanted from his disciples, contrary to what seems to be the mantra of the church in these days, it is not your love. Oh, that is certainly a good thing, but it is not enough. Anyone with little effort, investment, or cost can love Jesus. It is easy to have Jesus in your heart, but that is not where Jesus wants to be. Jesus wants his followers to have him in their heads and hands. He wants his followers to see the invisible people of the world. You know who they are - the people that no one wants to notice. They are the strangers of the world, those who live, think, talk, and look differently than we live, think, talk, and look. Those are the easiest people to go invisible, just like the child in the room that was nothing more than an obstacle.

You know why such people become invisible? It is because they can mess up your plans for the day, and you know how important our plans are!

-William Willimon tells the story of a conversation with a businessperson of the congregation. Willimon told him about the long-range plan of the congregation. After all, the businessperson should appreciate long-range plans, because that is where the Church got the idea and model from, business.

The businessman responded, “In business, long-range planning is dead.” We didn’t even know that the Berlin Wall was coming down. Nobody planned for that! Things are moving too fast. The future is too unpredictable. The trouble is, if a business goes through all of that effort to come up with a long-range plan, people come to love the plan more than they love results. They just keep following and sticking with the plan, despite the results.”

The disciples were planning among themselves who would be Jesus’ right and left hand men. With that, Jesus said to them “you are planning for the future when you are not able to see the needs that surround you today. The people who need you the most are the most invisible to your eyes.” The only long-range plan Jesus gave to anyone was a cross at the end of the road.

Rochelle Stackhouse is a UCC pastor in Connecticut. She writes about her first encounter with Fred Rogers, you know, “it is a beautiful day in the neighborhood” Mr. Rogers. If you are not aware, Fred Rogers was also an ordained Presbyterian. Rochelle Stackhouse reports about her first encounter with Mr. Rogers, at Princeton Theological Seminary. She and others were waiting for the elevator doors to open and when they did, there was Fred Rogers, a tall man. As the adults spoke to him, he completely ignored them and stooped down to address the children standing there first. Only after he had spoken to each one of them did he stand back up and speak to the taller people in the room. Sounds like what Jesus would have liked his disciples to be doing. Sounds like Jesus wanted us to be concerned about the invisible people first, then take care of each other.

Yes, anyone can love Jesus, not a problem at all. Jesus wants more than your love. He wants your hands and your 20-20 vision for the invisible people. He wants that even more than your love, because that is how to prove you love him.

Amen.