

Even before I became a pastor, I noticed church signs. Not just the message on the marquee, but the names of churches on the top of the sign. There's the church in Missouri with the name — Halfway Baptist Church. Hmmm! Something tells me that there's more to that story.

In Nashville, Tennessee, there is a congregation with what must be the longest name ever: "The House of the Lord, Which is the Church of the Living God, The Pillar and Ground of the Truth, Without Controversy, Incorporated." Really? A church without controversy?

In Decatur, Georgia, there is a church whose name may be more telling than not. This church said it was "Free For All Baptist Church." When I saw that sign I imagined elderly deacons in their Sunday suits engaged in an ecclesiastical version of a bar fight; throwing down their Bibles and wrestling each other to the floor in front of the communion table. The truth of the matter is, the people of God have always been and probably always will be a contentious lot, given to fussing with each other about all sorts of things, some of which matter and most of which don't.

In today's Gospel lesson, Jesus finds his disciples arguing about one of those things that do not matter, not in the family of God, anyway. As they were heading back to Capernaum, the disciples have been fussing and fighting over which one of them is the greatest. When you think about it, it is particularly ironic and disappointing that they are arguing about this right after Jesus has told them that as the messiah he will have to suffer and die

for the world, and that as his followers they will need to "deny self and take up a cross" as well. He presents them with a model of complete helplessness and weakness and they respond by contending for positions of power and influence. In other words, they don't get it.

In his commentary on *Mark*, N.T. Wright points out that not all Jews of the time believed that God would send a messiah and among those who did believe a messiah was coming; no one believed that the messiah would

have to suffer, much less to die. Most believed that “the One” would come in power and might and strength. They generally believed the messiah would come as a military leader, smiting the Romans and their evil, pagan allies, conquering the world in the name of Truth, Justice, and Yahweh.

So Jesus’ disciples just didn’t get it when he said in verse 31, “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.” Even as they heard his words, they certainly didn’t hear his meaning. They had figured out he was the messiah, which to them meant that Jesus was the new leader of the world; so they were trying to sort out their positions of importance in the new regime. And, Jesus, overhearing their arguing, called them on it, asking them, “What were you talking about?” And the text says they were silent. They couldn’t answer him. They were busted.

Could it be that in trying to formulate an answer to that question, it began to dawn on them just how wrong they were; just how far they had strayed from the path Jesus had called them to follow?

I imagine Jesus taking a deep breath, sighing and with a somewhat forced smile, saying, “Come here y’all, sit down, let’s talk. Let me see if I can find a better way to explain this to you.” He then proceeded to talk about how whoever wants to be first must be last and a servant of everyone. This “great reversal” is consistent with things Jesus says over and over throughout the Gospels about how in the Kin-dom of God things are almost the mirror opposite of how they are enacted in the world.

Then, Jesus did a monumentally important thing in the history of church worship services. There, on the spot, he invented the children’s sermon, complete with an actual child as the object in the object lesson! Jesus and the disciples were in the ground floor room of a house, it had open windows and doorways, and a crowd had gathered to listen to him teach his disciples. Jesus reached into the crowd and pulled a child, probably a toddler, or a kindergartener, into the room. Then he said, “Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me, but the one who sent me.”

With these words, Jesus proclaims his ultimate, great reversal. You have to

With these words, Jesus proclaims his ultimate great reversal. You have to remember, in the ancient world, children were symbols of powerlessness. Outside of normal parental affection, children were, almost literally, nothing. Lutheran pastor Peter Marty, in his commentary, says that "in the Greco-Roman world a father could punish, sell, pawn off or even kill his own child" without fear of legal consequences! It is interesting to note that the Greek words for child and servant have the same root and that Jesus used both of these images; child and servant, as symbols of who the messiah is and

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who we, the followers of Jesus, are called to be in the world. Children and servants, powerless and defenseless ones, that's us.

Our modern world gives the highest honor and respect to those with power and authority and importance. People in our world seek positions of strength from which they can control and manage others. We see that not just in the world, but as intimated in the beginning, it may be true in congregations as well. So the call of the Gospel to us today is the same as it was to those to whom Jesus spoke personally. power and control may be that way in the world, Jesus says, but it must not be that way among you my followers.

It may not be possible for the church to be the church and also be, as one of those signs said, "without controversy." On the other hand, just because we have controversy, it is not necessary that we be a "free for all" either. Through his teaching about the great reversal, the call to child-like-ness, to servant-hood, to powerlessness and humility, most of all though his own humiliation and death on the cross, Jesus has shown us the way forward though disagreements and controversies.

Rather than aspiring to power and influence and control within the world and within the community of the faithful; our calling is to seek to be servants of one another, actively loving each other in the name of the one who first loved us. It may not be easy; in fact, as some of us know, it's darn hard at times. But the call remains, the teaching of the Kin-dom endures,

the work is before us in our congregations, in our presbytery, in our synod, in our denomination, even as we minister in the world around us.

Let us pray: Mighty and sovereign God, Your Son, Jesus, taught us to love one another as You have loved us; to be a servant and not one who rules over others. Open our hearts to such giving love. Open our hands to reach out to those in need. Open our mouths, not simply to sing Your praises which are many, but to speak Your Word of love, grace, mercy, and hope. Let us be true disciples of Jesus who gave His life for us and the for the world. We pray this in His name. Amen