

September 22, 2024  
Lectionary 25, Year B  
The 18<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost  
Mark 9:30-37  
Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Norwood, MA  
Pastor Amanda L. Warner

### The Parable of the Soccer Game

Yesterday, I was sitting in my living room waiting until it was time to go watch Cyrus's soccer game. Britton, who coaches the team, and Cyrus, who, obviously, plays on the team, had left earlier for warm ups, but I didn't think there was much point in my going early just so that I could spend an extra 45 minutes in the rain.

So, imagine my surprise, when, at 12:35 Cyrus walked back into the house. I asked him what he was doing there and he said, "I forgot my shin guards." Luckily it was a home game, so he didn't have far to go to get back to the game, but still, he was going to be cutting it close to check in for a 1:00 o'clock game. Nine years. That's how long Cyrus has been playing soccer. Since he was four years old. He's been getting himself ready, packing his own game bag for about five of those nine years. So, it was really surprising that he forgot something as fundamental as shin guards. He made it on time to the game, though, and so did I.

As I said, Cyrus started playing soccer when he was four. Julia and John started when they were in kindergarten. Julia played until Covid cut her soccer career short, eliminating the final season of her 8<sup>th</sup> grade year with Norwood Youth Soccer. John played until third grade, when it became clear that it wasn't his passion. So, Britton and I have watched and Britton, who over the years has coached both Julia's teams and Cyrus's teams, has coached a lot of soccer.

And every year, every level, every game, there's always those moments, when everyone, the coaches, the spectators, sometimes the other players on the field are shouting to some player, "Pass! Pass! Make a pass!"

And there's always some player on the team who just won't do it. Often, it's one of the better players on the team. Someone who has a lot of justified confidence in their own skills. Someone who is a proven player. Someone who knows what they can do and maybe even believes that their skill level is higher than that of the other players on the field. So, when they get the ball, they are reluctant to let it go.

They just keep dribbling down the field, while they draw the defense around them, leaving their teammates unguarded, open, while their coaches and their spectators are shouting, "Pass!" While their teammates are shouting, "I'm open!"

But still, they just keep going into traffic, and almost always, ultimately lose the ball. Because they have the whole opposing team defending them, as it becomes clear that they are not going to pass the ball. Turning their team from a team of eleven players to a team of one. It's pretty easy for eleven players, ten if you don't count the goalie, to successfully defend, to successfully steal the ball from one player.

In addition to having attended more than my share of soccer games, as a soccer mom and soccer aunt, I have also attended my share of soccer practices. And guess what they work on at every practice I have ever seen, sometimes almost exclusively. Passing.

But still, there's always that one player, that one good player, that one talented player, who knows that he or she is the greatest, and who will not pass. And you know what that is? It's annoying. It's also a sign of an immature player. Because what really makes a player great is not his or her individual skills. It's when he or she learns to see the field and play a team game, rather than thinking he or she has to do it all.

Here in chapters 8 and 9 of the gospel of Mark, the disciples are having a tough time. Jesus keeps doing things and talking about things that seem to be at odds with each other.

He does some amazing things in these chapters.

- He feeds four thousand people with seven loaves and a few fish (Mark 8:1-10)
- He heals a blind man (Mark 8:22-26)
- He has his transfiguration experience, which we will talk about on Transfiguration Sunday, just before Lent (9:2-8)
- He heals a boy with an evil spirit (9:14-29)

All of these are impressive acts of power, things that show the crowds and his own disciples just how amazing, how powerful he is.

The disciples are pumped. They know that they're in the presence of greatness. When they're asked who people think Jesus is, they answer, "John the Baptist, returned from the dead, Elijah, a forerunner of the Messiah, or one of the prophets." Peter gets it right, after Jesus asks his disciples, "Who do you say that I am?" Peter answers, "You are the Messiah." (Mark 9:29)

The disciples know that they are living in historic, momentous times.

But then, on the other hand, Jesus keeps saying the wrong things.

First there's the instruction that Jesus keeps giving, that they are not to talk about the amazing things that he says and does.

And then there's the fact that he keeps talking about dying. In Chapter 8 he said, "the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again." (Mark 8:31)

In today's gospel reading, from chapter 9 he says, "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 9:31)

None of this makes any sense to the disciples. It is not what they expect from their Messiah. The part about betrayal, rejection, suffering, death, scares them and

the part about rising again, they just don't understand. It's almost like they don't even hear it.

In chapter 8, Peter responds to Jesus' words about suffering and dying by rebuking him, to wish Jesus gives a harsh response, saying, "Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things, but on human things." (Mark 8:33) And then Jesus gives them a teaching, one we talked about last Sunday, about denying themselves, and taking up their cross, and laying down their lives.

In today's gospel reading, the disciples, who are just perplexed by Jesus' words, don't even ask him what he's talking about. The reading says that they "were afraid to ask him." (Mark 9:32)

Maybe they were afraid that they would be rebuked, as Peter had been the last time all of this had come up. Although, Peter wasn't rebuked for asking Jesus a question. He was rebuked, the whole, "Get behind me, Satan" thing had occurred because Peter had had the audacity to rebuke Jesus, to correct Jesus, when Jesus said that he would suffer and die.

Maybe they were afraid that Jesus would tell them more about laying down their lives and taking up their cross and denying themselves, and they just didn't want to hear it.

So, they didn't ask. They just let Jesus' words roll over them, and they settled into a much more comfortable conversation among themselves.

Who was the greatest? Which one of them was the most faithful, most loved, most influential of Jesus' disciples?

I wonder who they picked? Was it Peter? Maybe not after that whole, "Get behind me, Satan" thing? Was it James or John? They were certainly close to Jesus. I wonder what arguments each made for his own position. I think that in their hearts they knew how ridiculous they were to have this argument, because when Jesus asked them what they had been arguing about on the road, they were afraid to tell him.

When Jesus confronted them about it, this man who had told them to deny themselves and lay down their lives and take up their cross and follow him, when they looked into his eyes, into his sad, and wise, and loving face, they probably knew how wrong their dispute with each other had been.

So, Jesus, instead of yelling at them or rebuking them, Jesus simply took a child in his arms and told them, “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)

The message Jesus was giving them was that those who belonged in the community of faith that Jesus was creating, those who followed him, did not seek only the powerful and prestigious to be part of their community, part of their team. They also sought the presence, the contributions, the fellowship of those who were weak, those who were disregarded by society, those who were looked down upon and ignored, of little value, seeming not to have much to offer.

It might seem hard for us, in our society, in our culture, to think of children in this way. In our society, many children, though certainly not all, are lifted up, loved, cherished celebrated, valued, treasured, sometimes even overindulged.

But in Jesus time, children were considered to be too weak to contribute, too weak to matter much. Of course, individual parents might have loved their children very much, but societally, because they weren't seen as having much to offer, they weren't regarded as very important. They certainly weren't seen as great.

But Jesus said that he was like them. And whoever welcomed a child welcomed Jesus. Jesus' own greatness was not to be known in his deeds of power, but in the ways in which he was weak, rejected, in his seeming powerlessness in the eyes of the powerful and mighty of the world.

And his community was to be one that did not seek the great, did not seek their own greatness or the greatness of the world. Instead, it was to be one where the weak and powerless of the world were embraced, welcomed, included, valued.

For what they brought to the community was the presence of Jesus and the one who sent him.

This is the parable of the soccer game. There's always that one good player, maybe even great player, who will not pass, because he or she knows that the other players on the team just aren't as good, will probably lose the ball even if it is passed to them. So, they go it alone, believing that they are greatest, that only they can save the day, make the goal, win the game.

But imagine what would happen if that great player stopped thinking about their own greatness and started thinking about the team. Listened their coach. Saw the weaker players around them, and drew the defense, and then made a great pass.

See now, the other player, the weaker player, running up the field, while the defense scrambles to change directions, to catch up.

See now the team playing like a team.

See now, the goal in front of the weaker player, and the goal scored.

And now, who is the greatest among them? The one who scored, the one who passed? Maybe no one is the greatest. Maybe it's just a team celebrating together.

That is what the church, the community that has been gathered to follow Jesus is called to be. Not a community of the great and the weak, the powerful and the powerless. Not a community of envy and selfish ambition.

Just a community where all are welcome, all are included, all are invited to share their gifts, whatever they may be.

We are called to be a community that works together, that shares what we have, that rejoices in each one, that, as the body of Christ, seeks the goal of the love of God made manifest in the world, and celebrates together, the greatness and goodness of Jesus among us. Thanks be to God. Amen.