

The First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham  
“Children of God: The Greatest”  
Rev. Dr. John Judson  
September 7, 2014

Genesis 27:1-17

Matthew 18:1-4, 10-14

There are moments when I believe that if some intelligent alien race ever came to earth and tried to figure out how we spend our time, the conclusion that they would draw is that we append our time on creating top-ten lists. It seems as though every day brings a new list. We have the top ten richest Americans, the top ten largest corporations, the top ten hospitals, the top ten best universities, the top ten best bang for your buck colleges, the top ten party schools, the top ten best looking and best dressed people (I did not make either list) and on and on. In fact, I would bet that whatever you are interested in; there is a top ten list for it. In a way this should not surprise us. After all we human beings are a competitive lot. Ever since we Homo-sapiens figured out how to move to the top of the food chain and demote the Neanderthals, we have been competing against one another for the top of whatever list mattered. And we do virtually anything to get to the top...which is where our story and this morning's story meet.

Both of our stories have this striving to be number one as their theme. Our first story is about Esau and Jacob's struggle to be number one to receive their father's blessing. Jacob and his mother even resort to lying and trickery to get it. Our second story concerns Jesus and his disciples. The disciples had spent their lives as outsiders to power. They were from Galilee, a small provincial kind of place that was looked down on by other Jews. They had staked their futures on this Jesus guy and so now they wanted to know where they would be ranked in the Kingdom of God. "So Jesus," they asked, "Who is greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven." We are not sure if they wanted Jesus to rank order them, or simply wanted an assurance that they would be top dogs when the Kingdom arrived. Regardless, Jesus response probably caught them off guard.

It caught them off guard because instead of giving them an assurance of their place at the top of the heap in the coming age, Jesus told them that if they even wanted to enter the kingdom they had to become like a little child; meaning humble and vulnerable. Chances are this disturbed them greatly, almost as much as being humble and vulnerable disturbs us. I say this first because they had followed Jesus as a way of leaving being humble and vulnerable behind. I say this second because the images which humility and vulnerability conjure up for us are often indeed disturbing. It is as if Christians are supposed to exist only in the background of life, always deferring to others, saying things like, "Oh, I don't want that job, give it to someone else. They are probably better than I am." Or it is as if Christians are to hang a sign on our backs reading, "Kick me, I'm a Christian." In other words we are to become the door-mats of the world. What I want to offer you this morning though, is that I believe this is not at all what Jesus meant when he brought the child into the midst of the disciples...and here is why; because this is not the way Jesus lived.

What I mean by that is that Jesus is the model of both humility and vulnerability. He is the model of humility because he stood with the poor, the marginalized and the outcasts in such a way that they knew that they mattered to him and to God. Jesus' presence with those on the margins was never condescending, but always compassionate. He treated them with the dignity and respect due to children of God. It was as if he was one of them and they were truly his friends. He did not act like Super-Messiah sweeping in to save those who were lesser than himself. Jesus was indeed one with those he served. He is also the model of vulnerability because when he ate with sinners and tax collectors; when he met with the wrong kind of people he was criticized and condemned. He became vulnerable because he dared to step across the acceptable cultural divides of race and status and stand with those who were the unacceptable. Ultimately these actions would lead to his death.

The year was 1977. The place was El Salvador. In that year the Catholic Church elected their new Archbishop and it was a conservative who had strongly supported the church hierarchy's practice of focusing on spiritual salvation and avoiding any work with the poor. The local priests, who lived side by side with the poor were stunned by the election. Three weeks after his installation a personal friend of the new Archbishop, Father Rutilo Grande, was murdered along with an elderly man and the man's grandson. Grande had been an advocate for the poor and the marginalized. The new Archbishop, looking at his murdered friend said, "If they killed him for what he did then I need to walk the same path." And in that moment Archbishop Oscar Romero began his short career as one who stood with the poor. He spoke out against poverty, social injustice and the assassinations carried out by government supported death squads. Three years later, while saying mass, Romero was killed as well. He was a man who had discovered what it meant to be humble, and vulnerable.

The question before us today then is with whom will we stand as we are called to be humble and vulnerable? Will we stand with the children in Detroit and Pontiac in need of a good education? Will we stand with foster children and youth who need love and support? Will we stand with the hungry of Metro Detroit to see that they have adequate food for each day? Will we stand with the poor in Yucatan who do not have adequate health care? Will we stand with the people of Kenya who have no access to clean water or education? Will we stand with the 70% of women in rural India who cannot read? My challenge to you today is this, as we come to this table which reminds us that Jesus stood with us and ask, "With whom will I stand in humility and vulnerability, as Jesus Christ stood with me?"