

“Stoop or Scoop”

(Mark 9: 30-38)

On Wednesday this past week, I was getting into the car to take Olivia to preschool and she spied some treats I was carrying in my hands. “Daddy,” she said with angelic sweetness, “who are the treats for?” Glancing in my rearview mirror I saw she had an angelic smile to match the sound of her voice. “They are for the Forgiveness class tonight, Livvy,” I replied. “What’s forgiveness, Daddy?” And I think two things. First, here is a teachable moment. Here is a living, sacred moment where I am at the intersection of my professional and personal lives, the intersection of being a pastor and parent come together, I’d better come up with something pretty profound that can make sense to a four year old. So, my mind is spinning and swirling. Because, the second thing I thought is how in the world do you take seven weeks of talking about forgiveness and condense all that conversation into words a child can grasp? So, I said to Livvy, “Forgiveness...I mean it’s kind of like...well think about...no.” You can hear I am off to an eloquent start. “Imagine” I said, “that a kid knocks down your blocks at preschool, forgiveness is...” And as my voice trailed off because at this point I am grasping for words that are eluding me, but before I can completely my thought, Olivia said to me, “Forgiveness means you are friends again.” In that serendipitous and sacred moment, a stunned silent smile crossed my face, for I realized I was in the presence of God.

Sometimes in the face of encountering the holy, we are rendered speechless, all our words vanish from the tips of our tongues and except for the sound of breath entering and leaving our body we are still. The disciples have that kind of stunned silent response three times within our scripture lesson this morning. First, in response to Jesus again telling them that he was going to suffer and die and rise again on the third day, they are silent. To be sure, back in chapter 8 of Mark’s gospel, they heard what happened when Peter tried to confront Jesus about this kind of outside the prescribed box labeled “Messiah” thinking that was ingrained within the Jewish faith. Peter, after naming and claiming Jesus as Messiah, then rebuked Jesus the first time he veered off the acceptable pathway a Messiah was suppose to travel. And in turn Jesus rebuked Peter, which I am pretty sure you never wanted Jesus to rebuke you. You see to be the Messiah was both a political and religious claim, the Messiah was the one to restore the throne of David, one to remove the foreign Roman rule, the one to make everything right and holy and reconcile the special relationship with God. This was the heartfelt prayer that was inextricably woven into one single word. Messiah was the hope of a people. The Messiah wasn’t supposed to suffer or die. So, when Jesus came back a second time with this heartbreaking, troubling, disconcerting teaching, the disciples are silent. They heard what happened to Peter when he spoke out and they think, “I am not going say anything.”

Then, a second time, as they are going down the road, an argument begins softly at first. Now, I've witnessed how these kinds of arguments start off innocently enough. Ethan says that the magnifying glass belongs to him. Olivia counters with the astute observation that it, and I quote, "does not". Which promotes the only logical response from Ethan, "does too," "does not," Livvy echoes back louder and more emphatically to stress the correctness of her position. "Does too." "Does not." Until, our children's bantering reaches a crescendo that our whole neighborhood can hear. All it takes is Jesus asking, "What were you arguing about?" to elicit yet another silent response from his friends.

Then, a third time, Jesus takes a child into his embrace, visually showing the disciples who they are to welcome and become like, and a third time the disciples offer Jesus a stunned, astonished, cannot even begin to utter a word, silence. This is quintessential Jesus, teachable moment Jesus, bring a smile to our face and make us feel warm and cozy Jesus. But friends, we are also missing a point here. You see, this teaching has an edge. Children were not held in such high esteem in Jesus' culture as we assume and practice today. Children were seen as property, and even marginalized as orphans. Children were often forced to work very hard, pressed into service at early ages. We need not turn the history pages in our own country too far back to encounter an eerie similarity in our earliest factories and woolen mills. So, to have the model of following Jesus be compared to welcoming a child as an equal and beloved was challenging and hence the silent response. Not only that, did you notice the **way** Jesus welcomes that child was to take the child into his arms. Now, there are two ways you can embrace a child into your arms, you can stoop down or you can scoop up. Both require and demand a physical commitment, there is no half way. Your back will feel the full brunt of the child's body and the child's energy will be absorbed into your very being. Stoop down, scoop up, friends, this is the only way you welcome a child fully with an embrace.

When we do that, our lower back might strain or our knees creak and crack, we begin to realize that faith is not an intellectual exercise, but involves our whole being. In fact, let's try that, because for almost one hundred fifty sermons you've all sat there so patiently and faithfully staring up here and listening to me silently, let's try a new way of experiencing the sacred, fully participating. So, if you are able, please stand. I see a whole lot of nervous expressions on people's faces, friends this will be okay. If you need to stay seated, that too is okay. Everyone please remember there is a wooden pew in front of you. Let's try this morning, gently and slowly and carefully stoop over, bend over, feel the pull of your lower back. If you can stoop a little further. As you do, think about our children here, think about your grandchildren, think about Izak being washed in the baptismal waters, think about children around the world, some of whom are hungry and some of whom still work and live in horrid conditions. As you stoop and feel the strain think about welcoming the children, all the children of the world. Slowly, gently come back to a standing position.

But each time this week you stoop down, bend at the knees to pick up something you've dropped or that string your vacuum cleaner won't pick up, remember the children in our community and in our world.

But it's not just stooping down, it's also scooping up. So, would you make a cup with your hands and imagine you are filling that cup with all that is in your heart this morning, those people whose fingerprints are smudged on your heart, your family, your neighbor who lost a job, your friend dealing with cancer, fill your cup with anyone whose name dances across your mind. Now, lift your cup toward the ceiling, up as high as you can, feeling the stretch in your arms, push out your pinkies even a little more, as though you are offering all to God, and then slowly bring the cup back to your heart. Now, hopefully you notice there is something else, something of God also in the cup as your hands touch your heart. Try this scooping prayer motion one time each day this week, or be bold and try it a couple times each day.

Stooping down, scooping up, that is what we are called to do. That is who we are called to be and embody this week. As you stoop and scoop and notice your movements this week, friends, I hope you realize that our motions dance to God's rhythm. We dance with the sacred when we hear our bones creak and our muscle squeak and feel our whole body respond, for we are embodied, made in the image of God, stooping and scooping people who move and have our very life held in God's presence. For friends God stoops and scoops and dances and welcomes us as beloved children. So may you notice your movement, may you be aware of the stooping and scooping and sacred stirring each day this week. And may you welcome each person who brushes up against your life this week as a beloved child of God. Thanks be to God and let God's beloved children with one enthusiastic voice say, "Amen!"