

Sermon (Printable) by Pastor Molly Doreza
Based on Mark 9:30-37 and James 3:13 – 4:3, 7-8a

“Imagine Jesus is showing a young man (who in many ways is still a boy) to us. Instead of a pleasant scene with joyful little kids, it is a scene of urgency. Suddenly, the child in the center of the picture is a suffering child. A child whose very life hangs in the balance.” Pastor Molly



First, let me say thank you to both Bethlehem and Bethel congregations for your generosity and understanding for my long absence. I had a wonderful time in Canada, and it was great to get away and have good rest and get some perspective in life.

Then, barely 48 hours after my return, I got news that my beloved niece’s son, Niko, had died. I spent ten days in Omaha trying to pastor my family through this devastating grief, while tending to my own. Your prayer and support meant (and

still mean) the world to me and our family.

When I opened the scriptures for this Sunday on Monday, I didn’t think they related at all to what I’d been going through. But it became clearer and clearer to me that they really do.

It came to focus when I read about Jesus showing a little child to his disciples. I’d always pictured that scene – the way most of us do – as Jesus surrounded by a bunch of kids. In a generic way, I thought this text was encouraging us to support children’s ministries – Sunday School, Confirmation, Youth Programs, etc. I think that is true.

But while I was reading this text, someone else came to mind. Niko. I imagined Jesus showing a young man (who in many ways was still a boy) to us. This image completely changed my thinking about this text. Instead of it being a pleasant scene with joyful little kids, it was a scene of urgency. Suddenly, the child in the center of the picture is a suffering child. A child whose very life hangs in the balance. A child who reminds me – and all of us – that ministry isn’t only about

the safe corridors of a church building, but more importantly out *there*, in a world of hurt.

When we are reoriented this way, the bickering in James' congregation and among Jesus' disciples isn't just bad manners. It's lethal. The distractions of "who does what" in church have in many cases coopted its mission. We fill out pie charts, and flow charts. We maneuver struggles between members about inane issues and cannot get over ourselves so that we can get to others who need us.

I'm not saying that mission doesn't need structure and planning. But often, quite literally, the baby is thrown out with the bathwater. (This is an interesting metaphor, isn't it, especially when we associate water with infant baptism).

When I got to Omaha and began to find ways to help Niko's suffering family, it took me days to find crisis intervention resources, and professional grief counselors. Because of my career, I at least knew where to turn. This is usually how it goes in the parish. The hurting come to the pastor and maybe a few friends in the congregation for help. We essentially "outsource" suffering.

There has been an insidious dichotomy between ministry and mission in the church. But now things have changed, and this dichotomy is no longer tenable. The ravages of Covid 19 have shown us that we can no longer see ourselves as attracting or waiting for people to come through our doors so we can minister to them. This was true long before the pandemic but has been glaringly revealed through it.

The church can no longer see itself as drawing people into the context of the church. Instead, we must see ourselves as being the church in the context of community. This switch in paradigm necessitates radical change. The silo mentality and competition between churches – which is really what James and Jesus were addressing – has to give way to compassion.

Jesus is clear: to welcome him you must welcome the vulnerable – teens and young adults who are considering suicide, those who suffer from mental health issues, the LBGTQ community, those estranged from us, the poor, the lost, the lonely. You name it.

The next time your heart stings for anyone who is suffering, picture that person with Jesus among his bickering disciples - and ask yourself how you can be "the

church in the context of community.” Stretch your imagination to see how we might quit the bickering among us and get to work, alleviating suffering.

Because that is the real deal, folks. If you want to follow Jesus, you must serve his suffering children. The child in our midst is Jesus himself. The mission and ministry of his church – if we want to serve him – is to serve the suffering. Plain and simple. Amen.

Pastor Molly Doreza