



September 25, 2006

Preaching: Pastor Ronni Verboom

Mark 9:30-37

“Finding your Size”

Have you ever been browsing quietly in a clothing store, only to be interrupted by a sales person? Very often they ask, “Can I help you?” But sometimes the salesclerk uses another line: “Are you finding your size?” This is a horrible question for many of us. Some of us hate shopping because the size issue is so stressful. The comic strip “Cathy” illustrates this, with Cathy made hysterical by the ordeal of shopping for a swimsuit.

Our physical size can be a sensitive issue for us. Our emotional, psychological size can be equally, if not more troubling.

Remember the story of Alice in Wonderland? Remember how Alice falls down the rabbit hole, and goes on to meet all kinds of weird characters? At several points her size is radically altered. She finds cakes that say, “Eat me,” and vials that command “Drink me.” She shoots up to skyscraper size, and cries buckets over this dilemma. Then she shrinks down like a shrimp and finds herself drowning in the salty sea that she cried while huge.

Alice’s adventures portray in a visual way an emotional reality, don’t they? In our FEELINGS our size grows and shrinks all over the map. Remember how it felt to shrink small: *You mean you’re seven and can’t ride a two wheel bike yet?* Remember being caught passing a note in 7th grade and how you wanted to shrink out of sight when the teacher read it to the whole class?

But remember how it felt to whoosh up to the size of a tall tree: *Jack, come see! Chloe tied her shoes by herself!* The cast has been selected for the fall play and your name is neatly printed next to the name of the lead character. The college you’ve dreamed of attending FINALLY sends their welcome letter. You’re promoted two levels at work. Your child makes you proud.

The pain of shrinking down to the size of a dust bunny is offset by the thrill of shooting up like a strong oak. In fact, most of us hate the pain so much, and love the thrill so much, we look for ways to boost ourselves up high.

Our Gospel for today shows that Jesus understands our struggle. Are we big or small? Are we important or worthless? Powerful or weak?

Jesus and his disciples had been traveling, teaching and healing. They came to Capernaum for a rest- they may have been in Peter's own home. They were tired, glad to be home, sitting and relaxing. Around them people were talking, baking bread, kids scooted around, playing. Jesus used his surroundings to teach his followers.

First he asked them what they were arguing about on the way home. SQUISH. The disciples froze. They were arguing over who was most important. Some of them had been feeling pretty big. They all now felt very small.

Jesus did not get angry. He whisked one of the small children scurrying around into his arms. Pointing to the tot he said, "This little guy? He's as big and important as I am. In fact, he's as important as the One who sent me, and should be treated as the HOLY ONE himself."

Friends, to bring a little kid into the circle of adult men being taught by their rabbi was a huge breach of appropriate conduct in Jesus' day. Jesus said, basically, "The smallest is the biggest. The first is the last. The last is the first. To be big, to wield power—be a servant to all."

How do we find our size? Jesus was saying, "Don't think you're great big—when you do, you're really teeny. But don't think you're just a speck of dust on the road of life—you are made in God's own image, a vessel for the Spirit of the Holy Creator of the universe."

Jesus knows we sometimes sin in thinking we're more important than we are. He knows we sometimes sin in thinking we're less important than we are. He says FORGET ALL THAT, and be a servant to all.

Friends, here in the United States we are in a unique position to SERVE others. We have immense wealth and power—surely as a nation, and even as individuals. A few weeks back, my son brought dinner home for us, from Boston Market. As he came in he said, "Boy, we are really lucky in this country." He told us that as he was paying for the meal, he was offered another roasted chicken for \$1.99. He said, "Another whole chicken?" They said "yes", and he said "Sure, why not?" On his way home he wondered how many places in the world an average person might have to work several days, or even all week, to raise the money to buy a chicken.

Friends, God has expectations of us. God expects us to be SERVING and GIVING in significant ways. God does not love US more than any other person on this globe. God CALLS US to use our good fortune in ways that serve others.

Our denomination gives all United Methodists an opportunity to serve locally, across the nation and around the world. This opportunity comes through each local church paying into a huge pot of what is called Apportioned Funds. These funds enable United Methodists to do together what no church, district or region could do alone. Each region, called an Annual Conference, sends funds to the national church. And each local church sends funds to the Annual Conference and the national church, and from there, around the world. The amount paid is determined by assessing the strength of the church by its membership, budget, assets and indebtedness.

The loaf of bread on the bulletin cover breaks it out for us. In the average United Methodist Church, each dollar you contribute is divided into three parts. 84.3 cents stay in your local church for ministries and expenses. 12.4 cents go for regional ministries. 3.3 cents go to United Methodist worldwide missions, salaries and administrative costs.

I'd like to highlight seven of the funds supported:

The World Service Fund: This undergirds a network of missionaries across the globe, supports retreat and camping ministries, certifies Christian educators and musicians, and makes new communication technologies accessible to the church, among many other ministries.

The Ministerial Education Fund: provides opportunities for men and women to explore a call to ordained ministry, gives funding to 13 United Methodist seminaries in the U.S.—and offers scholarships and continuing education funds to those in ministry. Both Pastor Rich French and I have received money from the Ministerial Education Fund.

The Africa University Fund: Since 1992, Africa University, the only United Methodist degree-granting university in Africa, has graduated hundreds of men and women from 20 countries. We know the continent of Africa is full of turmoil, conflict and suffering.

Last month, the Kane County Chronicle told of children in the Congo. The society has been so ravaged that the streets of its cities swarm with homeless young people. A young teenager, Esther Okudi, age 14, is pictured in the article holding her 1 month old daughter, Chance et Vie, which means “luck and life” in French. She lives in a rusting Peugeot car in a cemetery turned garbage dump in Kinshasa, Congo. Esther was orphaned and went to live with relatives. “My aunt treated me badly,” Esther

said. She has lived on the street now for seven years. “That’s why I came here. I feel safe here, with other children like me.”

Many students at Africa University are drawn there by their desire for an active role in changing their own communities and nations. A young man from the Democratic Republic of Congo, Emmanuel Naweji states, “I want to work through the church because I believe the church is the route to positive change.” Through our Apportionments God is helping us help him to help his homeland.

The Black College Fund: Eleven black colleges in the U.S. provide opportunities for students who might otherwise be excluded from the educational process. Tarnisha Adams, a graduate of Philander Smith College in Little Rock, Ark. says, “Because of your love and support, I was able to graduate from ... college. Continue to support the Black College Fund and students like me. Give us the opportunities to achieve in life. I thank you sincerely.”

When students in colleges along the Gulf Coast fled Hurricane Katrina, the United Methodist Church’s black colleges were quick to respond. Their efforts included raising money, taking in families, accepting students directly, offering tuition, fees, room and board, books and sometimes weekly allowances.

The International Cooperation Fund: This fund was established in 1952 to support ecumenical efforts around the world, foster a renewal of Christian unity and understanding and advocate for global peace and justice. How we long for global peace and justice—perhaps even more than in 1952!

The Episcopal Fund supports our bishops, paying their salaries, office expenses, providing for their housing, pensions, health benefits, travel and moving expenses. This is not glamorous, but needed and good!

The General Administration Fund provides just what it says—handling offices, salaries and paperwork, in addition to caring for historical documents, artifacts, shrines, landmarks and sites.

So, our denomination, through simple giving to any local church, provides us with the opportunity to SERVE and GIVE in significant ways.

Brothers and sisters, our church apportionment is \$7,833 per month. In 2006 we have sent in payments for January, February and March. We have not sent more because the money we’ve received has gone to pay salaries and bills, and for ministries of our local church. We have been doing good and wonderful things to honor and serve our Lord. However, we have not yet fulfilled our covenant to support ministries that depend upon the pooling of resources from all United Methodist Churches.

We have experienced great excitement and wonderful giving to special ministries in the last two months-- \$20,000 was given towards sponsoring a refugee family; over \$30,000 has been raised through a matching funds campaign to address building and property needs. Now, I don't know if God might nudge some folks to step up and make donations to help Baker MUMC pay its apportionments. I don't know exactly WHAT God has in mind! I just know that he expects us to be SERVING and GIVING in significant ways.

There are many ways to answer that call of God. The United Methodist Church has a website: www.umcgiving.org, if you'd like to know more about opportunities in our denomination. God is at work in the church across the globe. But God is at work in our culture too: Did you know that the **Thirsty Fox** pub recently auctioned off collectibles and raised nearly \$4,000? That amount was sent to Africa, to Juna Amagara Ministries, which is building a children's home to house up to 80 orphaned children. **Their** website is www.amagara.org, if you'd like to know more.

So- what size are you? We are the right size to serve and give in the name of Jesus Christ. God expects this of us. What does God have in mind for you? As you explore the answer to this question, remember that you are the work of God's hands, made the perfect size to honor and serve him with joy. Amen!