

## Children's Sermon

need a helper this morning. (Choose one youngster to assist. Position him/her where he/she can be seen by the congregation. Have the child extend his/her hands, wrists together, as you tie one loop of thread around the wrists while beginning to speak.) Let's see how strong you are. Can you pull your wrists apart and break that thread? Sure you can, it's just a little piece of wimpy string. Anyone can break through that. Let's try this again. What if I wrap it around twice this time? (Wrap and tie.) Can you break that? A little harder, but you are still stronger than that thread. That thread can't hold you. It can't tie you up. One more time. What if I wrap it around five, six, or seven times this time? (Wrap and tie.) I'm not sure you can break this one.

You're finally tied up by the thread. It has caught you. You kept getting more and more tangled up by the string because it didn't catch you at first. You thought you could beat it, but finally it caught you.

This is how sin works in our lives. We start messing around with things we know are wrong because we think we are strong enough not to get tangled up with them. At first, we may not get caught. We might get away with a lot, but then, BAM! We're all caught up and we can't get out by ourselves. Like the loops of thread that we can't break through, sin will eventually catch us and tangle us up.

I've known boys and girls who started telling lies to get out of trouble. They told one or two lies and never got caught, so they lied again, and again, and again. But before long, their lies caught up with them. Not only did they get in trouble, but they had a hard time knowing what was the truth and what was a lie.

We all think that we are strong enough or smart enough not to get caught by sin. But if we keep playing around with things that are wrong, eventually they will catch us. Sin has a way of sneaking up on us and tangling us up when we don't expect it.

Be careful and don't play games with sin. Eventually, we will get caught. God bless you.

Even while, in early July, my car radio related the near miraculous story of survival among the tiniest premature infants, I thought of Chuck, a brash, irreligious nurse whose acquaintance served to remind me once again that there could be a complete disconnect between a book cover and its contents.

Driving to the hospital on July 10th with my car radio tuned to NPR, the StoryCorps tale captivated me. Entitled “Babies On Display: When A Hospital Couldn't Save Them, A Sideshow Did,” I share an excerpt with you:

“Close to a century ago, New York's Coney Island was famed for its sideshows. Loud-lettered signs crowded the island's attractions, crowing over tattooed ladies, sword swallows — and even an exhibition of tiny babies. The babies were premature infants kept alive in incubators pioneered by Dr. Martin Couney. The medical establishment had rejected his incubators, but Couney didn't give up on his aims. Each summer for 40 years, he funded his work by displaying the babies and charging admission — 25 cents to see the show. In turn, parents didn't have to pay for the medical care, and many children survived who never would've had a chance otherwise.

“Lucille Horn was one of them. Born in 1920, she, too, ended up in an incubator on Coney Island. She'd been born a twin, but her twin died at birth. And the hospital didn't show much hope for her, either: The staff said they didn't have a place for her; they told her father that there wasn't a chance in hell that she'd live. ‘They didn't have any help for me at all,’ Horn says. ‘It was just: You die because you didn't belong in the world.’ But her father refused to accept that for a final answer. He grabbed a blanket to wrap her in, hailed a taxicab and took her to Coney Island — and to Dr. Couney's infant exhibit.

“Years later, Horn decided to return to see the babies — this time as a visitor. When she stopped in, Couney happened to be there, and she took the opportunity to introduce herself. ‘And there was a man standing in front of one of the incubators looking at his baby,’ Horn says, ‘and Dr. Couney went over to him and he tapped him on the shoulder.’ ‘Look at this young lady,’ Couney told the man then. ‘She's one of our babies. And that's how your baby's gonna grow up.’ “Horn was just one of thousands of premature infants that Couney cared for and exhibited at world fairs, exhibits and amusement parks from 1896 until the 1940s. He died in 1950, shortly after incubators like his were introduced to most hospitals. At the time, Couney's efforts were still largely unknown — but there is at least one person who will never forget him.” ([www.npr.org/2015/07/10](http://www.npr.org/2015/07/10))

Had not an innovative physician seen the potential for life in little Lucille Horn, she would likely never have lived. But Dr. Couney had faith in the spark of life he saw in her; had faith, too, that he could fan that tiny spark into who Lucille grew to become. The doctor had plans for this tiny infant. So did God.

In the gospel passage we hear today, Jesus is talking with his disciples about what was to happen to him, telling them that betrayal, death and resurrection lay just ahead. But, uncomprehending, the disciples were engaged in tangled argument about who among them was the greatest. Assuring them that the greatest was the least, the servant of the others, Jesus called a nearby child to him and said

to the disciples, “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)

Indeed, to welcome the child is to honor the seed of divinity implanted before birth within every person without exception. To welcome the child means to recognize, honor and nourish that divine kernel every person brings into the world and carries over a lifetime, blossoming into saintliness in some, remaining dormant in others. To welcome a child is to give honor to God’s abiding home within the human heart.

I think of Chuck, the brash, irreligious nurse whose acquaintance I made several years ago and who served to remind me once again that there could be a complete disconnect between a book cover and its contents. Near burnout from his regular nursing assignment, Chuck sought a few month’s refuge in the ER, caring for the broken and battered. When I first met him, he seemed to delight in trying to shock my religious sensitivities. That ended quickly, though, when other ER staff members took more offense than did I. After that, gentle joviality marked our interchanges. Only after several weeks did I learn more about Chuck: that his regular nursing assignment was the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit (NICU); that his dedication to the tiniest babies and their families was near legendary; that his huge and gentle heart needed a rest from the intensity of his caring, hence his escape to the ER for a few months, patients coming and going in quick turnover. Having returned to the NICU and his babies, I see little of Chuck these days, but whenever we pass in a hospital corridor, loud taunts precede a warm hug, the merest hint of what his tiniest charges receive from him.

At her premature birth in 1920, “The staff said there wasn't a chance in hell that [Lucille Horn would] live. ‘They didn't have any help for me at all,’ Horn says [today]. ‘It was just: You die because you didn't belong in the world.’”

But Dr. Martin Couney insisted she did belong in the world, and made it happen. And today, NICU Nurse Chuck adds his own defiant assent to that belief, working tirelessly to bring to fruition the seed of divinity within the tiniest lives.

## II

Would you consider yourself a competitive person? Or maybe I should ask, in what area are you most competitive? Maybe you're competitive in getting the best grades in your class or the best parking spot at work. Maybe you compete to make the best pancakes in your family or tell the funniest knock-knock joke or to get up the earliest on Christmas morning. Humans are naturally competitive. We like to have an edge over those around us.

Rabbi Harold Kushner tells the story of a driven young man in the pre-med program at a competitive college. The summer before his junior year, the young man took a break from his studies to travel to the Far East. He met a guru who questioned his pursuit of success. The guru claimed that the young man's constant desire to compete against others was poisoning his soul. He invited the young man to join him at his retreat center, where all the students loved one another and shared their possessions. So the ambitious pre-med student called his parents and told them he was dropping out of medical school.

A few months later, he wrote a letter to explain his new way of life. His letter began: "Dear Mom and Dad, I know you weren't happy about my decision, but I want to tell you how it has changed me. For the first time in my life, I'm at peace. Here there is no competing, no trying to get ahead of anyone. This way of life is so in harmony with my inner soul that in only six months I've become the #2 disciple in the entire community, and I think I can be #1 by June." (1)

It's not so easy giving up the need to compete, is it? **There are big rewards for competition in our culture.** Status. Promotions. Paychecks. Bragging rights. But what does competition do to our soul? It depends on the motivation behind the competition.

A woman wrote in to *Reader's Digest* with a story about her husband's recent golf game.

Her four-year-old daughter greeted her husband at the door by asking, "Daddy, who won the golf game? You or Uncle Richie?"

"Uncle Richie and I don't play golf to win," he said. "We just play to have fun."

Without hesitation, she asked, "Okay, Daddy, who had more fun?" (2)

Even little kids learn to keep score. Even little kids learn that life is about winning. But if someone wins, then someone else loses. If someone is first, then someone else is second and third and last.

In our culture, we often base our identity and self-worth on whether or not we are "winning." We judge our value as human beings on how close we are to being "Number 1." But someone is always going to outrun us, outrank us, out-perform us.

The greatest athlete on earth may have a lousy marriage. The richest person in the world may be in poor health. Someone always has something we want. The competition never ends.

There's a story of a man who had just sat down at his favorite restaurant and ordered his favorite milkshake. By the time the milkshake was placed in front of him, he needed to use the restroom. So he grabbed a pen and wrote on his napkin, "The world's strongest weight lifter," and placed the napkin under the edge of his glass. Surely no one would steal a milkshake from the world's strongest weight lifter!

He returned to the table a few minutes later to find that someone had drunk his favorite milkshake. The person had also flipped over the napkin and written on the back, "Thanks for the treat!" Signed, "The world's fastest runner."

That's the problem with being a competitive person. You're always chasing after some other person, after some other record. Someone will always be greater than you. You can waste a lot of energy, and lose a lot of joy, by always trying to stay a step ahead of the other guy.

Of course, Jesus understands our need to compete. He understands our desire to be the greatest. Fear and pride drive us to put our needs first, and to compare ourselves to others. But fear and pride are cannibalistic urges. They may drive us to achieve great things, but they also steal away the joy of achievement, and drive us further away from God and from others. Remember Jesus' words in John 10:10 where he said that he has come to give us a more abundant life? When Jesus confronted his disciples in this passage, he wasn't trying to shame them. He was trying to open their minds to the abundant life God had made them for.

And that brings us to our Bible passage for today, Mark 9: 30-37. I love how Jesus, who has the infinite knowledge of God, asks questions of us. He doesn't ask because he is ignorant. Jesus asks us questions so we will be honest with ourselves. Sometimes when you say something out loud, you realize how crazy it is. So Jesus asked his disciples, "What were you arguing about on the road? But they kept quiet because on the way they had argued about who was the greatest."

That's hilarious, isn't it? The disciples had seen Jesus feed a crowd of thousands, heal the sick and disabled, and heal a boy who was possessed by a demon. And yet they were arguing over which of *them* was the greatest in the group. That's like bragging to a famous chef that you finally learned how to make toast. Or telling a Navy SEAL that you fought off an attack from an aggressive butterfly on your nature walk.

Pastor Andy Kort tells of an incident that happened in his adult Sunday school class one morning. The young adults were chatting about their college alma maters, and the conversation became an opportunity for some good-natured "one-upsmanship." Someone boasted that he went to Davidson College. Someone else graduated from Duke, someone else from North Carolina. All excellent schools.

One young man remained quiet, so the students looked in his direction and asked him which school he'd graduated from. The young man said, "Just a little school up north."

"Which one?" they asked.

"Yale," he replied. "Have you heard of it?"

And that put an end to the boasting for the day. (3)

If I'd been Jesus, I would have laughed and laughed. Maybe I would have asked the disciples to explain their criteria for greatness. But Jesus didn't waste time with that. Our Bible passage reads, "Sitting down, Jesus called the Twelve and said, 'Anyone who wants to be first must be the very last, and the servant of all.' He took a little child whom he placed among them. Taking the child in his arms, he said to them, 'Whoever welcomes one of these little children in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me does not welcome me but the one who sent me.'"

One of the most popular movies in American culture is *The Wizard of Oz*, which came out in theaters in 1939. It may surprise you to know that *The Wizard of Oz*, which cost over \$2 million dollars to produce, was a flop when it came out. One movie reviewer said the movie had "no trace of imagination, good taste, or ingenuity." In fact, it took 20 years after its initial theater run for *The Wizard of Oz* to make back the money the studio spent to create it. But in the years since 1939, the movie has become incredibly popular on television. The movie studio has made a great deal more money on licensing the movie for television viewers than they ever imagined making in the theaters. (4)

One of the most popular lines from the movie occurs right after the main character, Dorothy, and her little dog Toto have been caught up in a tornado. The tornado tears them out of their tiny Kansas farm and lands them in the magical, mythical land of Oz. As Dorothy stares in amazement at the strange and beautiful new world around them, she blurts out, "Toto, I've a feeling we're not in Kansas anymore."

This line has become one of the movie's most quoted lines because it's such a great, understated way of saying, "Wake up! You are in a brand new world, and the old rules don't apply here anymore."

That's exactly what Jesus is saying in our Bible passage for this morning: "You're not in Kansas anymore! The old rules about status and honor and greatness that matter in your culture don't matter in the kingdom of God."

**It doesn't matter how our culture defines "greatness." According to Jesus, the first rule for greatness is to go where The Greatest would go.** Jesus is the Almighty God, the Great I AM, the Alpha and the Omega in the flesh. And he gave all that up to be born into a poor family in a ho-hum little town. He gave all that up to become a carpenter. He gave all that up to spend his time working with fishermen, and eating and drinking with sinners, and healing the sick and disabled. He gave all that up to

suffer an unimaginably painful and humiliating death to save us from the penalty of our sins and restore us to God. Where would Jesus go for us? The real question is “Where *wouldn't* he go for us?” He went from the glory of heaven to the agony of the cross to show us how much God loves us. If you really want to be the greatest, Jesus says, then go where The Greatest would go.

Many years ago an eleven-year-old boy named Trevor Ferrell saw a news report on the problem of homelessness in Philadelphia, his hometown. Trevor was so concerned about the idea of people sleeping on the street that he convinced his parents to gather up as many spare blankets as possible from their home and drive him into downtown Philadelphia. And then this young boy walked up to the first homeless person he saw and offered them a blanket. Trevor walked up and down those streets handing out blankets until he ran out.

And this was just the beginning of Trevor’s mission. He convinced his parents to collect bags full of clothes, and make dozens of peanut butter sandwiches to donate to the homeless folks downtown. Someone heard of Trevor’s mission, and they donated a van and volunteers toward his efforts. Soon, national television news programs began interviewing him. Why would an eleven-year-old kid from a wealthy suburb spend his evenings and weekends making food and collecting blankets for the homeless?

All Trevor could say was, “It's Jesus inside of me that makes me want to do this.”  
(5)

Trevor Ferrell had Jesus, the Greatest One of All, living inside of him, and this motivated him to go where Jesus would go, to the neediest members of his community, to share the love of Jesus with them.

**And the second rule of greatness is that greatness isn’t about you. It’s about God working through you.** Read through the Bible from beginning to end and look very carefully at who God used to do His work. God didn’t choose the strongest, the most powerful, the bravest, the smartest people to change the world. In fact, almost everyone God chose to use for His work would have been voted “Least Likely to Succeed.” So how did they end up being heroes of the faith? They let God use them for His good works. So what would happen if you and I did the same thing?

Pastor William Hinson and his wife Jean visited Plymouth, England, a few years ago. As they visited the spot where the Pilgrim ships set sail for the New World, Pastor Hinson recalled the words of John Robinson, the English pastor who went with them. Robinson warned the Pilgrims, “I charge you to follow me only as far as you see me following Jesus Christ. Follow me only that far.” (6)

“. . . follow me only as far as you see me following Jesus Christ.” Pastor John Robinson knew that the secret of greatness lies in following Jesus’ example. People may be impressed by our achievements, but they will be inspired by our service.

Pastor Edward Markquart saw this kind of greatness in a member of his congregation, a man named Bill Grant. Bill and his wife Mary had raised 24 foster children during their marriage. After retiring from the restaurant business, Bill Grant joined the church mission team and traveled to Mississippi twice to help folks who were affected by hurricanes Rita and Katrina. While the other volunteers from his church rebuilt damaged homes, Bill ran the kitchen operations that fed hundreds of volunteer workers. It was hard, hard work, but you'd never know it from Bill's attitude. Bill beamed with joy as he dished out food and encouragement to the volunteer workers. You also wouldn't know that while he was serving with the mission team in Mississippi, Bill Grant was battling terminal pancreatic cancer. He never told the members of his team about the fatigue and pain he endured every day.

After he returned from his second mission trip, Bill Grant entered the hospital. Pastor Markquart came to visit him. He knew he didn't have much more time. Pastor Markquart was so moved by this man's joy, his encouragement, his service on behalf of others. To the world, Bill Grant may have looked like a frail, dying old man, but in the pastor's eyes, he was a spiritual giant. Pastor Markquart says, "I told his charge nurse that we were in the presence of greatness when we were in Bill's hospital room. I just wanted to make sure that she understood that . . . I just wanted his hospital staff to know who they were caring for." (7)

Why did God create you? Was it to collect paychecks and promotions and first place in the pecking order? Or was it to bring hope and life to a dying world? Greatness, as defined by The Greatest One of All, Jesus Christ, consists of two rules: Go where Jesus would go—to the least, the last, the lost and the lonely. And let God use you to serve those in need. Your life will have an eternal, immeasurable impact if you compete to be "the greatest" in the kingdom of God.

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1. John Ortberg, *When the Game Is Over, It All Goes Back in the Box* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007).

2. Contributed by Barbara J. Gebler, *Reader's Digest*, March 1996, p. 26.

3. Schlomo's Wisdom, Andy Kort, Larchmont Avenue Church, [http://www.lacny.org/sermons/dsp\\_sermons.cfm?id=127](http://www.lacny.org/sermons/dsp_sermons.cfm?id=127).

4. "Wizard of Oz: A TV Success Story" by Aljean Harmetz, *Special To The New York Times*, March 16, 1983, <https://www.nytimes.com/1983/03/16/movies/wizard-of-oz-a-tv-success-story.html>.

5. #731 #1101[for documentation of illustrations, download Holwick's Sermon Illustration database at <http://members.nbc.com/dholwick/illust.html>], "What Love Is All About" Pastor Holwick's Sermons," Copyright © Rev. W. David Holwick, 2000, First Baptist Church; Ledgewood, New Jersey Chakoian First Presbyterian Church, Granville, Ohio <http://www.granpres.org/Sermons/2007-02-04.htm>





### III Desiano

Since I was a kid, I've heard the phrase: It's too bad that youth is wasted on young people. This only makes sense, however, if someone is looking back at youth and seeing things that she or he did not see before. Children and teens go through youth with the consciousness they have. For them youth is an experience, not a memory that is analyzed.

What do we make of Jesus' injunction to the apostles that they look at their lives in terms of a child? The contrast has an exact point: it isn't that children are totally innocent and always wonderful. Rather, children experience life with an openness that adults should mirror in their lives. Children experience life without calculation. Ever since Jesus began to announce his destiny, that he would be rejected, tortured, and executed in Jerusalem, his disciples have been doing their calculations. They still do not have the basic point, that the essence of Jesus' life is selfless service, his willingness to give himself for the sake of others. Rather, immediately after reiterating his destiny, we find the disciples arguing about who among them would be the greatest. They don't have in their heads the picture Jesus has. For them, following Jesus has been a way to get ahead, possibly even to have political power in a kingdom. Jesus knows that it is exactly the political powers that be who will be the instruments of his death, the leaders in Jerusalem and the occupation leaders of that time, the Romans. They are making their own calculations.

Jesus wants us like children because children accept life as it comes, often with joy and laughter. The second reading echoes this when it talks about the good gifts that are showered upon us by a loving God. They come from a heaven of goodness, and they can be received only in an attitude of grace, an attitude, that is, of receiving gifts as surprises, as unexpected favors, which come to us from God's generosity.

This is the fundamental Christian attitude, often summed up by the word "stewardship," a profound awareness of the grace-filled gifts we receive, a profound gratitude, and a subsequent living of our lives in a generous freedom. A child's face before a birthday cake, kids at an amusement park, children playing in the water for the first time. This is the freedom and openness that we are called to have.

What limits our lives are not the possessions and power that we feel we don't have; what truly limits us is the loss of freedom and spontaneity, that automatic joy that should be part of every life.

The test of Jesus' vision will come soon enough, whether he can accept even death and apparent defeat, with the openness and trust he is trying to teach his apostles, and us. Jesus knows well the calculations of the wicked; our first reading shows exactly the logic of trying to dominate life by power and trying to maintain power by destroying others, especially the weak and innocent. When Jesus' accepts his destiny, he teaches us one of the greatest lessons: in the end, it's not the calculating and power-hungry who win.

Rather, only those whose hearts are open and trusting, like the hearts of children, really know the meaning of life.

