

“Dechomai”

Sermon by Pastor Dan Harrison, Church of the Covenant 9/23/18

When I turned 13, someone kindly gave me what every young teen boy wants for his birthday—a book. This book was a tough read though for my 13 year old mind, thirty odd years after the book had been written by its author William Golding. The story, *Lord of the Flies*, took me multiple tries to get over its cryptic, uniquely mid-century, British-style prose and figure out what made this book such a classic. Many of you, of course, have read it before and if not, are probably familiar with its plot and premise. The story takes you along as a safe spectator to the fictional story of a group of British school boys who survive a plane crash on a deserted, tropical island. And there, they fight primal urges to impose a brutal pecking order amidst chaos, consisting of the cruelest leader wins. Ralph, the main character, the protagonist and in opposition to the brutal dictatorship of the other boys, often searches his own moral character to nudge him towards the good, not so much the evil—and his friend and advisor “Piggy” who is bullied by the others never fails to remind Ralph of the “right path,” which results eventually in his own death by the mob that surrounds them on the mountainside towards the end of the story. Ralph laments this climactic moment of cruelty in chapter 12 when the author writes, “Ralph wept for the end of innocence, the darkness of man’s heart, and the fall through the air of the true, wise friend called Piggy.”

Mr. Golding established a premise in his book, no doubt inspired in part by the cruel atrocities committed by the Third Reich during World War II, that if you leave humans to their own devices, they will choose to kill; they will choose to be naturally evil, craving ultimate power. This idea seems to resonate with many in our culture, even today. This was the same premise established in my childhood as a loyal Baptist; it is what I learned in Sunday School—that our nature even from birth is naturally flawed and will inevitably choose “sin.” This “sinful nature” argument has been exported around the world over the past century, and is difficult to overcome when the world around us seems to often succumb to violence and greed over selfless compassion. And God knows this world needs more selfless compassion. However, I see with Jesus, a new way of understanding of how our nature works (or rather, however, an old understand that has somehow been forgotten by some of us). In this story in Mark 9, where the disciples argue among themselves who will be greatest in the coming Kingdom, Jesus diffuses the debate by creating a new understanding of what it means to be “great.” Jesus tells them that the “first shall be last and the last shall be first.” I think that our kids often secretly decide among themselves who it is that they feel is favored most by their parents. They’ll say, “Ah, it’s “Johnny”; he can get away with anything. He’s their favorite.” Favoritism is a hard thing for parents to squelch. I know Ruth and I have tried very hard to do just that with our four kids. Have we been successful? You’ll have to ask them. My dear friend Rabbi John Nimon, on this very subject, shared with me that his youngest child asked him once, “Is it true that I was an accident. You and mom hadn’t intended to have me?” And Rabbi John quipped instantly, without a second thought, “Yes, that’s true. But that was the same for your brother and sister too”—quickly putting to rest any idea that one child was loved more than another in the uniquely humorous style that only Rabbi John seems to be able to pull off so easily.

Jesus, too, was clear that there was no place for “favorites” in his Kingdom. Remember, his Kingdom was to be a Kingdom of justice. How can you have justice if you have favorites? Jesus, in fact, makes a counter-argument to favoritism in the proposal of an “opposite” concept: The first shall be last and the last shall be first. This isn’t the first time Jesus proposes this idea—turning traditional thinking on its

head. Jesus, in fact creates a counter-culture where the most esteemed should take a back seat to the least esteemed. The homeless should be front and center and the privileged should be on the periphery—and not in an “objectifying” way, meaning not in a way that tokenizes the marginalized as a feature for those in power to simply present as a their work of charity. This is antagonistic to Jesus’ newly forming framework. Jesus is teaching true humility and genuine innocence, love.

He gives the perfect illustration with how we should be. He takes a little child in his arms. What a beautiful picture, right? Like a parent, with their own child being cuddled in the strength, care, and protection of those larger parental arms—we are to imitate him with this small child. Jesus takes what in many ways was a marginalized, forgotten, and often disregarded group of people in their midst—the children—and says, “if you don’t welcome them, you don’t welcome me.” In fact, his illustration is so profound, that he imposes his very Messianic essence onto the children. Why is this so profound? Because children, in those days, much like in our recent history, have no rights. They are simply in the care of their parents or the ward of the state. They do not have rights of their own. They cannot vote. They rarely have a say in regards to their well-being, their agency of choice, their ability to create, and do not have a voice in society. Not often, anyway. Don’t get me wrong, there are moments where a voice emerges among children, like with the Parkland students in Florida. But it is rare. Jesus, undoubtedly, knew this intimately, and this inequity was even more pronounced in the culture of his day. He took what was a completely dis-empowered group and says in this teaching that we must welcome them, and if we do not, then we are in effect rejecting Jesus himself, and in this way, rejecting God.

By making these statements, Jesus is giving the children of his day (and ours) worth. He is saying how you value them, you value him. Wow. That’s revolutionary if you think about it. Children do not vote. They do not have a say. We rarely have a town-hall meeting with kids. We rarely ask them to voice their concerns, their angst, their pain. And if we do, we rarely take them seriously. We, instead, often simply say, “They’re just kids. They don’t know what they need or what they want.” I’m guilty of this too. This sermon is not a referendum on you as much as it is a personal critique of myself. I have not taken their leadership seriously at various points of my life, adopting the same attitude as many others. However, I am a student of the teachings of Jesus, and yet I have often missed the very essence of the Messiah himself, to welcome children... to welcome ALL. And what does Jesus mean by “welcome”? He says, “Whoever welcomes these little children welcomes me.”

The author of Mark uses the word “dechomai” for the word “welcome”, which is also often translated as “receive.” *Dechomai’s* actual meaning, though, is literally what Jesus is doing with the child as he speaks—“to take into one’s hands.” Jesus is creating a picture of how we must welcome children, completely, totally, lovingly—in so doing, we are welcoming God (and others) in the same way—that is, taking God into our hands, into our grasp. And not in an objectifying, abusive, exploitative way. Not in a “I pity you” kind of way at all. From all angles of this picture, it is an intimate act of love and tenderness, humility and selflessness, but is also in a context of respect and mutuality. Jesus shows the purity of the child, not the “sinful nature” many of us have been led to believe. He exposes the innocence, the purity. It is the same for the “others” in our lives, the marginalized that find their existence on the fringes of our own. The homeless, the disenfranchised, the disregarded, the foreigner, the parentless, the abandoned, the addicts, the mentally hurting, the emotionally fragile, and the shamed. This is where God is. These are the people that require our “dechomai”—our loving grasp, our embrace. And they deserve equity,

justice, voice. They deserve to be equalized in a society that has all but forgotten them. Jesus spurs us on to action of *dechomai*. However, this process requires an inward change first.

We must overcome our own prejudices first. We must *dechomai* internally the things we have avoided, the people we have evaded, the ideas we have hidden from ourselves. We must love our enemies, forgive our persecutors, and love ALL people. And this process starts deep in the recesses of our hearts. If we fail to do so, we open ourselves to a growing sickness of bitterness. And this is a sickness we cannot afford to take on for a long period in our lives, as it will fossilize and subsequently poison all the relationships around us. After we cleanse our internal we turn our hearts outward, we operate in the action of *dechomai* to embrace all those around us. We seek out the “least of these” in our society, the forgotten, the voiceless, the most marginalized. And adhering to Jesus’ logic, we lift them to a status greater than our own, not as a form of charity, but as a form of God-given equity. We do not seek a “thank you,” for as Paulo Freire, the Brazilian educator says, “you do not thank for that which you are owed.” We must lift people to their rightful place. We must bring to wholeness that which was broken long ago. As the Jews say, we must usher in Tuken Olam—place back the shards that had been lost. This is what Jesus meant by “the one who seeks to be first, must be last, and the servant of all.”

As we approach the annual recommitment and commitment of membership for the church two weeks from today, we have two covenants we share in, one for our Covenant Members and another for our Community Members (both covenants are available in the foyer on the reading rack). Please take one. Study it. And reach out to any of us with your questions. This church is built on a foundation of *dechomai*, but we must remind ourselves what it looks like, but inwardly and outwardly. If you feel like you are considering taking a plunge into membership, please join with us on our all-day retreat, here on campus, Saturday October 6. You are under no obligation to become a member, but we journey together, often in silent study, prayer, and reflection, throughout the day... in hopes of weighing out the costs of what such a calling to membership would mean for you in the upcoming church-year. *Dechomai*. Let us embrace all those around us, as we embrace our true selves.

Peace to you