The Measure of a Man
Sermon for the 16th Sunday after Pentecost
September 20, 2009 – The Rev. Torrence Harman
Proverbs 31:10-31; Psalm 1; James 3:13-4:3,7-8a; Mar 9:30-37

The Gospel of Mark is a course in discipleship. Unfortunately, it seems that the disciples here never get past discipleship 101. We watch them bluster and blunder about, most of the time completely missing the mark and we think, “O, how sad, why don’t they just ‘get it’ – and move along.” We marvel at Jesus’ patience with them.

But the real tragedy is that too often we don’t identify enough with the disciples – don’t learn from their mistakes. Probably because it would cause us to confront our own less than “kingdom” behavior and then do something about it. Which would probably require us to change our ways.

Today’s lesson is about measuring up – or rather Jesus might characterize it as a lesson in measuring down.

What’s at play is the everyday world of weights and measures. And what emerges is a very different picture of how the Kingdom of God works going about weighing and measuring things and the way the world works going about weighing and measuring things.

The disciples are caught up in all too human and worldly ways as they argue amongst themselves about who is the greatest among them.

Not that worldly ways are always wrong. After all God created the world and everything that lives in it, including us human beings. And didn’t God say over and over again how good it all was – at least at the beginning? But as time passed it seems we got off the “goodness” train. We lost sight of all the goodness and in our blindness started to make a lot of wrong turns.

We live in a world that promotes hierarchy. Who is the first, who is the most attractive, who makes the most money, who is the smartest, who is the most powerful, who is the winner? We honor and value “firstness” and “bestness.” It’s the good, better, best mentality. It separates folks into different layers, different stratas and that colors our attitudes and our behaviors one to another.

What is the measure of a man or the measure of a woman? This is a provocative theme. Remembering that I had heard that phrase before, I googled it. It’s a popular title among authors and songwriters. Martin Luther King, Jr. wrote a book, naming it “The Measure of a Man.” Sidney Portieir wrote a book with the title “The Measure of a Man: A Spiritual Autobiography. There’s also a book titled “The Measure of a Woman” written by Gene & Elaine Getz. It’s a popular title for songwriters and musicians: Elton John, Clay Aiken, Jack Ingram and numerous other groups have written and sung their versions. The words may be different, but the tune the same. They are all dancing to the same tune, struggling with the same theme: how do I measure up and what do I look to as a yardstick? The words of the writers evidence a struggle – between the world they live in and something else.
In the Roman world at the time of Jesus, children were non-entities. They had no power, they had no voice. They had no status. They were, in effect, invisible. They were the lowest on the totem pole of society and family – even below the servants, the slaves.

How does Jesus respond to what he knows is going on with the disciples as they argue among themselves, as they try to set up a pecking order, so to speak? He takes a child, puts the child among these men and says, “Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.” Jesus is identifying with a child, a powerless, least-of-society child. Jesus is describing to these men a Kingdom world where the least have as much value as the first.

The Divine Kingdom demands inclusivity – an embracing way of living with each other and with our Divine parent. It is a way of living in love – without discriminating. It is counter cultural to do this in the world we have made with our will full-ness and our need to define ourselves in relation to others in a heirachal manner. To live as Jesus is teaching is counter to the worldly system of valuing, rating, measuring. It is counter, unfortunately, to ways we have been taught to live and act in this world that separates the powerful and the powerless.

As we consider the lesson Christ is offering, we need to see the connection between Christ’s teachings and our own baptismal covenant. Do you remember the questions?

Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself?

Will you strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being?

An old testament God lays a plumb line in the midst of life. And measures man and woman in relation to their orientation to self or to service of justice and peace – of putting themselves first or of putting God and others first.

A New Testament Son of God reaches for a child. And says, with his words and actions, you will be measured in how you treat the least of those among you, how broad your love is, how embracing. You will be measured by how large your heart is and how long your arms are.

Our Baptismal Covenant calls us to a life of search and service, of reaching out, of love, of striving for justice and peace – a life of inclusivity and respect. Every one is a person of dignity and worth in the eyes of God. We all stand on this common ground. To do this we need to be intentional about changing some of our ways. We need courage and strength to say goodbye to the worldly yardstick by which we too often live. We need to focus on the Divine yardstick of the life and ways of Jesus Christ – the way of love. We need to, individually and collectively, answer our baptismal call to love and mutual respect with the response: “I will, we will, with God’s help.”

I end with the words to one of the versions of the song “The Measure of a Man.” It’s by a group called 4Him. It reminds us of the difference between how the world too often measures us and how God measures us.
“The Measure of a Man” by 4Him

This world can analyze and size you up and throw you on the scales
They can I.Q. you and run you through
Their rigorous details
They can do their best to rate you
And they’ll place you on the charts
And then back it up with scientific smarts
But there’s more to what you’re worth
Than their human eyes can see
Oh, I say the measure of a man
Is not how tall you stand
How wealthy or intelligent you are
‘Cause I’ve found out the measure of a man
God knows and understand
For He looks inside to the bottom of your heart
And what’s in the heart defines
The measure of a man
Well, you can doubt your worth
And search for who you are
And where you stand
But God made you in His image
When he formed you in his hands
And he looks at you with mercy
And he sees you through His love
You’re His child and that will always be enough
For there’s more to what you’re worth
Than you could ever comprehend

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You can spend your life pursuing physical perfection
There is so much more
More than ever meets the eye
For God looks through the surface
And He defines your worth by what is on the inside

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Oh, I’ve found the measure of a man
God knows and understands it
For he looks to the bottom of your heart
And what’s in the heart defines
Yeah, what’s in the heart defines
Yeah, what’s in the heart defines
The measure of a man
I know, I know