

**Proper 20b  
Mark 9:30-37  
September 20, 2009**

**There are millions of children like Sujita Blon. Sujita is a Nepalese girl whose father died when she was nine years old. Her mother found work in a carpet factory, but then eloped with her boyfriend, leaving Sujita behind. Sujita's uncle took her in, but he had three children of his own, so at age 10, Sujita began work, hand-tying carpets at a loom in the factory to help provide for the family.**

**Or children like Sergio. Sergio spent the summer picking cucumbers here in Michigan, working with the skill and pace of an adult, yet he is only eleven years old.. He has been working in the fields since age seven., usually clad only in a sleeveless shirt and shorts, his bare skin exposed to the sun, to fertilizers and pesticides.**

**Unicef estimates that 158 million children under the age of 14 are engaged in child labor - one in six children in the world. They work in mines, they stitch clothing in sweat shops. They wade through manure in the fields. They are everywhere but they are invisible, toiling as domestic servants in homes, sold into the sex trade by their own families, hidden from view in factories.**

**And Jesus takes a child, an invisible, forgotten child, who probably was working hard in that little house in Capernaum – sweeping the floor, comforting the baby, tending the animals, serving the meal. Jesus takes a child – an invisible, forgotten child -- and sets it in the midst of this tense conversation boiling among his disciples.**

**Jesus takes a child and says, “Whoever wants to be first of all must be last of all and servant of all.” Jesus takes a child and says, “Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me, but one who sent me.”**

**Jesus takes a child, in order to turn his disciples' world view, and our own world view, on its head. He's been traveling quickly, secretly, heading toward Jerusalem. He's been trying to tell the disciples that he's going to be rejected, arrested, tortured, crucified. He's been trying to tell them this is the way of the Kingdom, that God will vindicate the sacrifice of his life. But they won't hear him. They can't hear him.**

**They would rather argue among themselves. Who is the greatest. Who will sit at his right hand and his left when Jesus kicks the Romans out of Israel. Who gets to sit on the top of the heap. Who is number one.**

**And Jesus stops them. He stops them short. He shows them this child, this invisible, forgotten child. He says that welcoming this child, last of all and servant of all, is how you embrace Jesus himself, and not just Jesus, but the very essence of God who sent him.**

**Well. The disciples must have felt as though they had fallen into some kind of looking-glass world, some sort of alternate reality, where everything they thought they understood was turned backwards and flipped on its end. It must have seemed to them as though Jesus was speaking a kind of gibberish, as incomprehensible and opaque as the words of a book held up in front of a mirror.**

**And I wonder if we don't find this all just as bewildering as the disciples did. Because even with two thousand years between us, our world view is very much like theirs. Things haven't changed too much. On our side of the looking glass, it still counts if you can claim you're the best, or the brightest, or the most powerful.**

**There is so much of this struggle for supremacy going on in our world right now, this struggle to claim the side of righteousness, the struggle to win, the struggle to be famous, or infamous, or even to just get fifteen minutes of fame. It's gotten so noisy. Joe Wilson yelling at the president. Kanye West snatching the microphone from Taylor Swift to insist that Beyonce had the best video. Football fans watching the rankings week after week, hollering about their team. Everybody jostling. Everybody yelling. Everybody wanting to be louder than, better than, bigger than everybody else.**

**But life on Jesus' side of the looking glass is different. It's not about being somebody. In Jesus' kingdom, it's all about being nobody. Look at his object lesson -- a little child, a child who will be his stand-in, his ambassador, in this world of competence and competition. Take a good look at that little child, but don't look with twenty-first century eyes. Don't look in order to see your own adored and adorable children. Don't look in order to see untainted innocence and unchained creativity.**

**Jesus sets that child before us not because she is innocent, not because she is lovely or lovable or loving. He presents her to us because she is nobody. She is like Sujita. She is like Sergio. She is a commodity, a laborer, a tangible asset in an uncertain world.**

**You see, in Jesus' time, children were nobodies. They lived at the bottom of the social and economic ladder. They started helping out as soon as they could walk. They started serious work in the house or shop or farm when they were just six or seven. Apart from that, children were just supposed to mind their parents, to speak only when spoken to, and to do what they were told. They were nobodies. The child Jesus set before the disciples was a nobody.**

**But Jesus said, "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me," and in that one sentence reveals the scandalous nature of the Kingdom of God. Jesus -- the Son of Man, the Messiah of God -- doesn't care about all the somebodies. Jesus -- the Son of Man, the Messiah of God -- stands with all the nobodies.**

**His backwards, looking-glass kingdom is a kingdom of nobodies, where competition and competence have no place. In the Kingdom of Nobodies, it doesn't matter how smart you are, how stylish you are, how rich you are, or how powerful you are. It doesn't matter what television show you are on, or if it was you or Taylor Swift or Beyonce who won best video, or whether you can shout down all the people who don't agree with you.**

**In this backwards, looking-glass kingdom, the only way to be number one is to be last of all and servant of all. In the backwards Kingdom of our Lord Jesus Christ, even God is a nobody, reigning from a cross set between two common thieves, between two nobodies.**

**A strange image – a kingdom of nobodies. But I suspect that this backwards, looking glass kingdom of nobodies – strange as it is – is the true reality. I suspect that it is our petty little world of who’s in and who’s out, who’s ahead and who’s behind, who’s the greatest and who’s the least – I suspect that our world is actually the strange and distorted reflection of God’s ultimate reality.**

**The image Jesus sets before us today is like a glass in which we see darkly, but within it, we can glimpse the true Kingdom of God, the Kingdom of Holy Nobodies. And once we catch a glimpse of it, then we are bidden to bring it to life. Jesus invites us to help him create a Kingdom of Holy Nobodies in this world of “We’re Number One.”**

**So here is the quandary ... if we want to meet Jesus, if we want to know him, if we want to follow him, if we want to reflect the strange backward reality that is the Kingdom of God, then we will seek out and embrace the nobodies of this world as though they were somebodies.**

**We will seek out and embrace drug-addicted babies in hospitals and Alzheimer patients in nursing homes. We will seek out and embrace the immigrant farm crews bent over like ghosts in the fields around us. We will embrace the kids who sleep at Haven House because they have no home of their own, as well all the kids who go home to families that are as lethal as the streets.**

**If we really want to meet Jesus, to know him, and to follow him, then there must be no human being who is too odd, too broken, too poor, too sick, too dirty, too foreign, or too worthless to stand outside our embrace.**

**Eventually, if we follow Jesus in this way, we will find that he is leading us, bit by bit, silently and mysteriously, back to our real home in the strange and backwards looking-glass Kingdom of God. Eventually, as our embrace stretches wider and wider, our hearts will stretch wider in turn, to take in more and more of this curious Kingdom of God. Eventually, as we reach, as we stretch, as we grow in compassion and love and service, our very lives will begin to take the shape of an embrace.**

**And then we will find that God, in God's infinite, mysterious grace, is re-forming us in a cruciformed shape, stretching us into the shape of a love that knows no limits, molding us into the all-embracing shape of the crucified Nobody whom we call Lord of all, and King of all.**