Sunday, December 15, 1985
JESUS: HIS MINISTRY (NO. 2 IN A SERIES)
Mark 9:33-37

During this advent season in this sermon series, we are looking at the uniqueness of Jesus from several different perspectives. We are discovering how he is the same as all of us and how he is different.

Last Sunday I noted that Jesus was a “holy man,” and individual who lived on that mysterious boundary where the human and the Divine intersect. He knew first-hand the experience of the holy. He was vividly in torch with what we call the “World of the Spirit,” that dimension or realm of reality beyond and within the visible world of our ordinary experience, a dimension charged with power, whose ultimate quality is compassion. He lived the human-divine intersection. He was the human-divine intersection.

However, Jesus was not a “holy man” for his own sake, or just for the sake of holiness, but for our sake — for the sake of everyone in the world and for the world itself. As the Gospel of John puts it” God so loved the World that God gave God´s only son.” Jesus calls us to be holy that is, to experience the holiness of God, and to let God´s spirit be active in our lives, not for our own sake, so that we can brag or show off to others how holy and righteous we are but for service to others.

To understand this better, we are going to look in some detail this morning at the ministry of Jesus when he physically lived on this earth so that we can see what that implies for us as individuals and as a church congregation. True holiness always leads to compassion and to service of others.

It is commonly believed that Jesus began his public ministry when he was about thirty years old. He had been baptized by John the Baptist and for a time both of them carried on a public ministry, each with his own district following. Since John the Baptist had been at his ministry for a longer time, he was the more well known of the two. There is also some New Testament evidence that some of the early disciples of Jesus had previously been followers of John the Baptist.

Then it happened. Without warning, King Herod Antipas struck a blow to imprison John the Baptist. According to the Bible John was arrested because he had openly denounced the King for entering an incestuous marriage with Herodias, the wife of his own half-brother. Herod Antipas only used John´s preaching as an excuse to put him into prison. What he really feared was that John´s influence with the common people might lead them to rebellion against Rome. Of course, John the Baptist never had any idea of rebelling with force of arms. Not too long after, John the Baptist was put to death.

The arrest and subsequent death of John the Baptist deeply saddened Jesus, and no doubt it served as a warning to him that he also could be in danger. Something else also happened. From then on, the disciples saw Jesus himself as a kind of second John the Baptist. In addition, the imprisonment and death of John the Baptist caused more attention now to be focused on Jesus. This obscure carpenter from the town of Nazareth abruptly became an object of widespread attention from the Jewish people among whom he moved — their attention being of two kinds — one of high hope and the other of suspicion.

In the first place, the high hope was to be found in his disciples and among the lower classes of people in Galilee, many of whom had centered their earlier hope on John the Baptist. Many of them again fixed on Jesus the wild dream that besides merely reforming the Jewish religion, he might also become their leader who would drive the Gentiles from the occupied land of Judah. There is evidence for this in the words used by one of the disciples to express his grief after the death of Jesus: “But we had been hoping that he was the man to liberate Israel.”

In the second place, Jesus aroused suspicion among others, particularly among the Sadducees and the Pharisees who were in control of the temple in Jerusalem. These Jewish rulers saw in Jesus a threat, a man who might gradually prove to be their undoing. They perceived Jesus as a self-appointed reformer of Jewish religion and as an agitator who could eventually arouse the masses.

Jesus himself was painfully aware of both kinds of misperception. Neither side appreciated his true purpose. No one had eyes to see that his true intent was aimed at one end only — to bear witness to the love of God.

And yet how could he convince people of God’s love? The stars on which he gazed in the wilderness of Judea were cold as ice; the Dead Sea, in which no living creature stirred, and the mountains behind the sea, revealed no more than a God who is prone to anger and who punishes and who sits in judgment. This extremely severe father-image of God prevailed.

Merely talking about “the love of God” and “the God of love” is easy. There was a lot of misery in those days. To judge from life’s cruel realities, it is easier to think about a God of wrath and retribution than to believe in the God of love.

So, the overriding theme that runs through Jesus’ life and ministry was his concern for how he might demonstrate the existence of the God of love and make it possible for people to know and experience firsthand the love of God, and then be able to spread that love to all people.

“Come to me all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.” Reading these words of Jesus from the Gospel of Matthew, we can picture him with his arms extended wide, standing by the shore of the Sea of Galilee.

Above all, Jesus practiced that love of God in his ministry. Around the Sea of Galilee, the towns were full of sick and crippled people who were neglected by their neighbors and even by their own families. There were others, men and women like the tax collectors and the prostitutes, who were condemned by the priests. Reading the New Testament provides a picture of Jesus with his loving tendency for drawing close to men and women who were otherwise forsaken or held in contempt.

In the village around the lake were victims of malaria, whom healthy people despised because they thought they were possessed by an evil spirit, yet Jesus tended to their needs.

The lepers, forbidden to approach any village or town, were considered under the law to be unclean and to be the recipients of punishment from God. Yet Jesus ignored that part of the law and tried to help them. He enlisted into his group of close disciples one of the tax collectors who were always objects of derision.

The Gospels contain many stories about Jesus and these abandoned souls. The stories are of two kinds: one is where Jesus heals their infirmities (sometimes called miracle stories), and the

other is where, rather than performing a healing, Jesus simply identifies with them in their pitiable suffering — in other words, “consolation stories.”

What is especially impressive in the consolation stories is the way they picture Jesus spending his time on the sorrows and the sort of men and women to whom others paid no attention. Love and sympathy flowed from him to these forgotten people like blood from a deep wound. We, in our own selves, know how we are attracted to glamorous and beautiful people and how easily we close our eyes to those who are filthy and ugly. Not so with Jesus!

At the same time that Jesus healed people and consoled them, he understood that many people are on the lookout for something else — they want practical and tangible results — signs and wonders — success! Magic! Yet love is an act which in this visible world bears no direct correlation with tangible benefits. Sometimes we can love and love and love and see no direct immediate results.

It’s significant that in the Gospel accounts not one of the people that Jesus healed is said to have become one of his close followers. On the other hand, there is evidence that many of those that he consoled, that he identified with, did become followers, some even disciples. Miracles seldom bring commitment.

Thus, the pain of Jesus hides in the background of every miracle story written into the New Testament. He healed people out of compassion and yet he knew that it might lead to the wrong conclusion about him and his basic mission. He was afraid that soon people would look to him only for signs and wonders and would not hear the message of God’s love.

Even his closest disciples frequently missed the point of his ministry. In the story read this morning from Mark’s Gospel, Jesus overheard the disciples arguing as to which one of them was the greatest. And Jesus had to remind them once more that “If anyone would be first, he must be the last of all and servant of all.” And he took a child and put the child in the midst of them; and taking the child in his arms he said to them: “Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me; and whoever receives me, receives not me but God who sent me.”

To us, that statement does not seem very revolutionary. However, biblical scholars claim that there are no more countercultural, radical, revolutionary sayings of Jesus than those regarding children. As helpless, dependent, non-productive burdens, children were in that time, at best, second-class citizens. One day these children might grow up to be productive and protective of their parents. But until then, they stood far down the social ladder — behind even women, the poor, the sick, and the lame.

So, Jesus is saying, “In God’s realm, even helpless, valueless, dependent children are received — no less than the poor, the sick, and the lame.” And in that spirit, with God’s spirit active in him, Jesus carried on his ministry. He used the helpless little child to symbolize, to stand for all the helpless, dependent people in our society.

What does all this have to do with us? The ministry of Jesus is to be the pattern, the model, for the ministry of the Church. The New Testament repeatedly calls the Church “the body of Christ.” If it is the “body of Christ,” then it is to do what Jesus did — to reach out to the outcasts, to the broken-hearted, to the lonely, to the forgotten, to the sick, the filthy. The Church does not exist for its own sake, just as Jesus did not come into the world for his own sake. The Church exists to reach out to others and to tell them in word and deed of God’s love.

Yet how often we Christians and the churches get off the track. We talk about having Jesus Christ as our “personal savior,” as if that were the end of it all. In fact, the word “personal” does not even exist anywhere in the Bible. It is not used even once!

Jesus came not to lead us to a close relationship to him, but to a close relationship to God. As I noted last week, Jesus is the door, the opening, the way to God. And because of having a God-relationship, an experience of the holy, then we have the power and the love to serve others. When we say with St. Paul that Christ lives in us, we are saying that the love of God lives in us.

And how do we receive Christ, this love of God, into our lives? Jesus said, “Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me; and whoever receives me, receives not me, but God who sent me.”

So here we are at the third Sunday in Advent, having been taught for most of our lives that God is great, omnipotent, omniscient, powerful, almighty, and God is all that. But God is also something else too. Now this baby in Bethlehem comes showing that God Almighty is a little one who loves little ones. And this little one grows up and becomes the servant of all and asks us to do the same. It strikes us as strange, and it turns our world upside down. Amen.