In the gospel of Mark, Jesus foretells his death three times, and all three times are on his final journey to Jerusalem. The first time he makes the prediction Jesus is with his disciples in the far north of the country, in Caesarea Philippi (we read that passage of scripture two weeks ago). Now today in our reading we hear Jesus predicting his death for a second time. They have moved from the north, now the group is getting closer to Jerusalem, they are in the southern part of Galilee, in the seaside town of Capernaum. After the first prediction the disciples argued, and after this prediction about Jesus’ death we find them arguing again. What are they arguing about?

When you were a kid in school, did you ever have the teacher leave the room for a few minutes, and bad things happened, and when she gets back, she somehow miraculously knows exactly what happened while she was out of the room? And when the children ask, “How did you know that?” the teacher says, “A little bird told me.” Those of you who are teachers know that no birds are involved. It is the children themselves who tell you, it is written all over their faces.

Even though Jesus asks the disciples “What are you arguing about?”, I think he knows from the get-go what the disciples were arguing about. This week I’ve been trying to imagine myself into the story. It helps that a few years ago I was on a learning tour where we actually walked from Nazareth to Capernaum, a three-day hike. I can imagine the big rolling hills, the valleys, the way they would have caught a glimpse of the Sea of Galilee in the distance. There were 14 people on the tour I was on, and as is the case with most groups of people who walk long distances, some gather in bunches, while some prefer to walk alone. On this day that we read about, maybe Jesus was walking ahead, the disciples were dawdling behind. Perhaps the occasional word drifted up the path to Jesus, or maybe it was just the distant murmur of their voices, the rise and fall of their conversation: he could tell they were arguing.

When they are all sitting down in Capernaum that night, Jesus asks them, “What were you arguing about along the way?” They are all silent. None of them want to say anything.
I’ve been wondering why the disciples were silent. And why were they arguing about greatness? Doesn’t it seem kind of random to you? But maybe there’s a clue in the story. Two things have happened just before this argument. The most recent thing is that Jesus called the disciples “faithless” when they couldn’t cast the demon out of the boy. He told them that in front of a whole crowd of people. That must have smarted. They were disciples, they had left everything to follow Jesus, they believed he was the Messiah, and he just told them they were faithless. Ouch! Now instead of having a quiet walk where they each examine their hearts and whether they are, in fact, faithless, I wonder whether they aren’t as a group trying to figure out whose fault it was that they couldn’t cast out the demon.

One of the disciples says, “I TOLD you we should have prayed first, but no one ever listens to me!” or “Why do you always walk in and start taking over when we go to do something, why didn’t you ask us first before you touched that boy?” I can see them arguing, trying to figure out who was the most to blame, jockeying for position. They are hurting and they want to feel better about themselves, and the quickest way they can think of to do this is by putting someone else down. Someone else is stupider than they were, and so that can make them feel smarter. Who is the greatest?

Maybe that was it. But maybe there was something else that was causing this argument about greatness. Because there is not just one thing that happens before this argument, there are two things. The other thing is that Peter, James and John have just been on the mountaintop with Jesus. They witnessed the transfiguration, they saw Elijah and Moses, they heard a voice from heaven.

You may remember from our reading the transfiguration story the other week, that Jesus ordered Peter, James and John to tell no one what they had seen. The gospel of Luke even tells us that at the time they did, in fact, tell no one what they had seen. They came down the mountain and they didn’t say anything. Knowing what we do about the disciples, and maybe more importantly, knowing human nature, how likely do you think it was that they could keep that a secret? Maybe they had full intentions of not telling anyone, and they didn’t tell anyone at first.

A significant detail to remember is that the problem with not casting out the demon happened while Jesus was up on the mountain with Peter, James and John. That means it was only nine disciples who don’t cast out the demon, it was nine disciples who forgot to pray, it was nine disciples who screwed up. When the twelve start to discuss whose fault it was that they couldn’t cast out the demon, what do you imagine happened? There are three disciples there who are sure they are not to blame.

I can see Peter starting it, saying, “Well if we would have been there with you, that would never have happened, we would obviously have known how to pray to rid the boy of that demon.”

“What do you mean? Are you saying you know more about following Jesus than the rest of us?”
“Well, it’s kind of obvious. Who did Jesus choose to go up the mountain with him?”

“So what, you got to go up a mountain with Jesus! Every one of us has gone up a mountain with Jesus at one time or another, he loves climbing mountains!”

“Well, this was different than the times you went up with him. This time he chose us in particular because...because...something special was going to happen on the mountain this time...”

“What are you talking about...”

“Well, if you must know...”

And so the story is wiggled out of them, and before you know it, there are three disciples with little smug smiles. Perhaps Peter, James and John are starting to feel just a tad superior. Just a bit privileged. Just a wee smidgen holier than thou. And there are nine disciples feeling left out, feeling unchosen, feeling looked down upon by the others. And these nine are not smiling.

I think of another group of men in Israel, and one of them had a special smug look on his face. And a multi-coloured coat on his back. I can imagine in our story today, if there was a pit, and a chance of getting away with it, these nine disciples might have thrown these three in it, and sold Peter, James and John to a bunch of traders heading for Egypt that very night.

So back to the dusty road, with Jesus walking alone, overhearing them having a heated argument. Is it a big leap for Jesus to figure out what they are arguing about? He TOLD Peter, James and John not to say anything. You can imagine he knew perfectly well it would cause a big argument and jealousy between his disciples if the whole mountain experience came out. He only wanted them to tell the others once he had died and was raised from the dead. He told them that explicitly.

So Jesus asks them, “What are you arguing about?” But they are all silent. If they had been just been talking about whose fault it was that they couldn’t cast out the demon, they probably would have said that, Jesus knew all about that. But, if they are arguing about why certain people were chosen to go up the mountain and certain people were not chosen, how can they admit to Jesus that they were talking about something he explicitly told them not to talk about? And so they say nothing. But a little bird tells Jesus just exactly what is happening.

Jesus uses a parable, a living parable, to teach them. He says, “Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.” Then he takes a child into their circle, and puts his arms around him or her.
In Jesus’ day and age, children were loved, but they were not that important until they actually grew up and could start contributing to the family. On a scale of who was the lowest and the least in Jewish society, a child was pretty much at the bottom of the heap. Jesus takes a child, and says, “Whoever wants to be first, must be last of all, and servant of all.” “Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.”

Jesus tells them, clearly, that they are to be servants. More particularly, he tells them that they are to be servants to a child, like the child they are all looking at. They are to be taking care of that child. By serving or welcoming that child, they are serving Jesus himself.

This is a hard pill for the disciples to swallow. Serving Jesus is one thing. Serving God is good. But serving a child? Taking care of a child? That’s not a man’s job. That’s not what they signed up to do. It is so shocking to them, it doesn’t compute.

Now the disciples have left everything to follow Jesus. So in some ways, they have jumped out of some of the cultural norms for their day, they are not working in a traditional sense, they are not catching fish, or collecting taxes, or whatever job they would be normally doing. They traded being “upwardly mobile” in a financial sense, to being “upwardly mobile” in a religious sense. They want to be with this Jesus who is the Messiah. He is pretty important. And in this story, and in some of the stories to come in Mark, you can see that they are pretty caught up in having that importance rub off on them. They want to be religiously upwardly mobile. They are aspiring to greatness through their association with Jesus.

But now Jesus totally stops them in their tracks. He wants them to be a servant, to be people who take care of, who welcome children, the people who are nobodies in their society. With this statement, it’s like Jesus takes a car going uphill at 100 k, and just slams it into reverse. He strips all the gears. The only thing the car can do now is roll down the hill. “What?” the disciples are thinking. “You want a race to the bottom? You want us to be downwardly mobile, associating with the lowest and the least?”

They can’t absorb this. We know they don’t absorb this because in the very next chapter of Mark some children do come to want to see Jesus...it’s that “let the children come to me” story. And guess who rolls out the UNWELCOME mat? The disciples will have nothing to do with the children, and they shoo the children away. They have not heard what Jesus was saying. They can’t imagine stooping so low, they can’t imagine that he is literally telling them to take care of the children.

Taking care of the lowest and the least, taking a downwardly mobile path...this is totally in keeping with Jesus’ life. Because simply his existence, the incarnation itself is about downward mobility. We can think of the verse in Philippians 2:7; Jesus “emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant...and being found in human form he humbled himself...”
Jesus was downwardly mobile. Once Jesus the man realizes that he has a special relationship to God, he never asks for or wants special recognition. He calls himself “the son of Man.” In today’s language and culture it’s like he calls himself “everyman” or “son of ordinary Joe.” He’s not out to be the bigwig, or the head haunch or the VIP. He doesn’t want people to worship him—when anyone tries to do that he flees. He never wants the disciples to say, “Holy, holy, holy Lord, can we have supper now?” or “Almighty and eternal Jesus, when are we going to Jerusalem?” He didn’t want that from his disciples, and he certainly wasn’t courting earthly power from anyone else. Jesus purposely avoided some very important cities in the area where he might have had a bigger impact and gotten more followers. He never tried to be elected to any political office or work his way up the hierarchy in the scribe world, or even become the best debater the Pharisees had ever seen by going to all their important meetings. In fact, while he does go to the religious centre of country on occasion, for the most part he spends time in the little obscure villages with the ordinary people, preaching and healing and feeding people.

So for Jesus to say, “Take care of this child,” it’s not exactly a new idea if the disciples had really been watching Jesus. But they are surprised by this, just as they will be surprised and startled by Jesus taking up a towel and washing their feet. They have not yet been able to grasp that there is something about the kingdom of God that involves downward mobility, that involves ignoring earthly prestige and power, and focusing instead on love. And particularly love for the people that the world ignores and discounts.

So here we have this story in the Bible. What’s the takeaway for us this morning? We listen to this story, and see the mistake that the disciples arguing about greatness, we see Jesus teaching them about welcoming children, we see them shooing away the children in the next chapter. We shake our heads and go, “Tsk, tsk, tsk. The poor disciples are so dense, they don’t get it. They don’t realize how important children are. They are so different than us. We value children. We welcome children. Why just a few minutes ago we had a children’s story right here in this church!”

So I am guessing that right now we are feeling just a bit smug. Just a tad superior to the disciples. Just a wee smidgen holier than them.

But wait a minute. I was hearing the other day that it’s hard here at Lendrum to find people to help with the preschool class. We have a wonderful teacher in Martha Huebert, but we need other people to help Martha just by being there in the class with the children. Are we taking Jesus’ words to heart, “Welcome the children?”

Sitting and listening to a children’s story in a worship service does show tolerance, but it is not very much work, it could hardly be classified as serving. Jesus says, “Serve the children.” When we hear Jesus’ call to “Serve the children,” I think most of us quickly interpret that to mean, “Well we should just make sure that we have people welcoming children. That’s what Jesus means!” Again, conveniently, that does not involve very much work on most of our parts. That’s work for the children’s Sunday school co-ordinator to do.
But I don’t think that’s what Jesus means. Jesus does not actually say to the disciples, “I want you to always make sure that there are other people taking care of the children.” He wants the disciples to take care of the children. Themselves. But they can’t imagine that Jesus is serious. And so when the children come, they do the wrong thing. They can’t imagine stooping so low.

Could it be that inside us we think it’s beneath us to go to the basement and sit on the carpet and sing the welcoming song, and participate in the little parade around the room, and listen to a story told with pictures? Maybe we think it’s just something we wouldn’t get anything out of. And we only like to do things that give us pleasure. And we might have excuses: “But they are discussing something very important in adult Sunday school, and I don’t want to miss that. And I want to be upstairs with the adults where the important discussions are happening and important people will hear my contributions.” Whoops, did we say that out loud? Because we already determined that everyone is important. We did that in our children’s story, where we took the smallest child and put them back to back with the tallest person in the church. Who is more important? We know that the children are just as important as the big people.

In fact, Jesus never gathered the disciples and told them, “Make sure you have important discussions with the important people, because the kingdom of God is there.” He knew without a doubt that the disciples would have respect for the rich and powerful, and want to have important discussions. That’s human nature. Instead he tells them, “Make sure you welcome the children.” And he meant that literally.

Now this little example has maybe made you a little squirmy, especially for those of you who haven’t helped in that primary class, which is a lot of people in this room. Maybe you are thinking that I am being way too literal with this text. You probably want to argue with me, and you are even wondering, “Is the message of her sermon really that I am supposed to go and sit on the carpet in the basement and build lego block towers with the kids?”

Yes, that is precisely what I am saying. As your pastor, I am entirely confident in proclaiming, that I can’t think of anything that would benefit our church more, than if a lot of you started taking a turn downstairs in that classroom being a helper in the preschool class. The reason I can be so entirely confident about this is because Jesus so clearly and directly urged the disciples to do just this.

Now there are wider implications of this text, but before you breathe a sigh of relief, I want to tell you that I don’t think that the wider implications excuses us or allows us to ignore Jesus’ injunction to spend time with children.
Jesus was talking about more than just children. In addition to talking about real children, he was talking about what they represent. He wanted the disciples to identify and serve the lowest and the least in society. In order to do that they will have to give up any more arguing about who is the greatest. They will have to stop trying to do the things that make them feel good about themselves by giving them status or power in the eyes of others. Status and influence go out the window.

Jesus calls the disciples, he calls us, to be servants. When you hear the phrase, “we must be servant of all” does it grate on your ears, or make you squirm? Probably not so much. We use the word “servant” so often in church that it has a sort of holy ring to it. Jesus was a suffering servant, we want servant leaders, we serve one another. One of my favourite hymns is called, “Will you let me be your servant!”

If Jesus lived today, and was saying these words, he could just as easily have said, “Whoever wants to be first of all has to work at the McDonalds drive-thru. The person who is first has to be the attendant at the car wash. Whoever wants to be first has to become the person sweeping up the hair in the hair salon. They have to be the shoeshiner at the airport.” Imagine yourself doing any of these jobs.

All of these jobs are about serving others. They are jobs that are of low status in our society, they are some of the lowest paid jobs. Most of us like to do things that propel us upwards on the social scale. To actively seek out and spend time and actually serve the lowest and the least, that goes against the grain. Yet that is what the kingdom of God is about, strangely enough.

It’s hard to be downwardly mobile. It’s hard to be a servant of all. This week I found out that Peter Rempel, our former pastor for many years at Lendrum, just a few years after he was the pastor, came back to work in the church, this time as the janitor. I asked him what it was like coming back as the janitor after being the minister. He just smiled and sort of chuckled, and said, “No difference, we’re all the same, we’re all serving.”

That’s the attitude I hope we can have in the church, it’s not about status, or putting ourselves over anyone else, it’s simply doing a job that needs to get done.

In the next couple of weeks, you may find yourself facing an opportunity to serve someone. It’s going to involve some work and giving some time. Many people here like to serve, and give a lot of time to serving others. But we have to make choices about whom we serve. When you find yourself debating, “Should I do it, or not?” I hope that this story about the disciples and their resistance to Jesus’ call to downward mobility will hover there in the background.

Instead of the criteria, “Will I like doing this? Will I get something out of it? Will it make me look good if I do this? Will I get praise and support from people if I do this?” Instead of those criteria, we remember Jesus’ call to be downwardly mobile. Ask the honest question of yourself, “Would it be hard for me to humble myself enough to do this job?”
Jesus often calls us to nitty gritty work, that we don’t know much about, but that involves us loving the lowest and the least. Jesus in this story takes a child into the centre of the circle and says, “Serve the children.”

But how far can you take this story? Jesus takes this story all the way to Jerusalem.