

A Sermon by Deacon Geof Smith

Mark 9:30-37 / Re-establishing deacons in the Church in New Hampshire

September 28, 2015 – St. James, Keene

Let's pretend, I am Sam.

Sam I am. And I have a question for you: do you like green eggs and ham?

How many of you remember Dr. Seuss' classic book, *Green Eggs and Ham*? It's the story of someone named Sam trying to get a Who from Whoville to eat green eggs and ham. Sam's just so sure that if the Who tries them, he'll like them.

So I ask you again: would you like them here or there?

Would you like them in a house? Would you like them with a mouse? Would you eat them in a box? Would you eat them with a fox?

Now those of you who know this story know how the Who answers these questions. This is where you get to give part of the sermon: see if you can say with me what the Who says. Are you ready?

Not in a box.

Not with a fox.

Not in a house.

Not with a mouse.

I would not eat them here or there.

I would not eat them anywhere.

I do not like green eggs and ham.

I do not like them, Sam-I-am.

Ah, but that doesn't keep Sam from trying! He tries and tries and never gives up. Sam just keeps after that Who until finally the Who gives in.

But for all that effort, Sam comes awfully close to failure, doesn't he?

Why is that?

Well I think it's for pretty much the same reason we find in today's gospel, and last week's too for that matter. You see, in one sense, Jesus is Sam-I-am, trying to get us to try green eggs and ham. Jesus wants those who say they want to follow him to know about discipleship, to know about what it really means to really follow him.

And it hasn't been easy. Both this week and last, Jesus is trying to teach his disciples about his own death, and they're just not getting it. You may recall last week, Peter, in a solid case of denial, told Jesus, to stop talking about death. And Jesus blasted him, saying, "Get behind me, Satan!"

Now you'd think after that, this traveling band would be walking along in sort of a silent pout, licking their wounded pride. But what are they talking about today as they pass through Galilee? They're arguing about which one of them gets to be the greatest; who gets to be lead dog on the sled team! No wonder Jesus says, "Guys: really?"

Well, no, actually he tells them, "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all." But at this, he only gets blank stares from twelve sets of eyes.

Clearly Jesus has to try something different. Sam-I-am won't give up.

Ah – but how to get them to understand? With a box? With a fox? No.

Well then how about a child? I'm not sure really what Dr. Seuss might choose to rhyme with "child," but from our 21st century perspective, this picture of Jesus holding a child on his knee seems a pretty endearing image, doesn't it? The kind of image that will be posted in Sunday School classrooms everywhere. To us, children are all about innocence and humility. Children are symbols to us of a brighter future, of hope for the world.

But in Jesus' day, childhood is a mixed metaphor at best. Children occupy an interesting place in a first century household. Sure, they represent the future—they will carry on the family

name, and eventually provide for their aging parents, but in the meantime, they are a liability. In a subjugated society, they are another mouth to feed in a time and place where there isn't much to go on the table. And childhood in ancient Israel is a time of incredible risk: a full 60% will never live beyond age sixteen. As a result, children are not seen as metaphors of innocence and humility; they were symbols of smallness, of vulnerability and insignificance.

So when Jesus lifts up this small, vulnerable and insignificant toddler, and plops it into the middle of his circle of friends; he isn't aiming for an Art Linkletter moment. Jesus isn't saying, "I love these little cuties. Isn't this one adorable?" What he's offering his disciples is a challenge. When he says "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me," he's saying to them: bring the small and vulnerable into the midst of you. Don't just give them lip service; put those you consider insignificant into the very center of your faith. For "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all."

There's that word "servant" again. Did you know the Greek word used for servant here is *diakonos*? Yes, I know you probably figure I can find references to *diakonos* in the list of ingredients on a cereal box, but it's true! Look it up!

Jesus puts serving the poor, the sick, the weak and lonely at the very center of discipleship. Through Christ's own example, servanthood becomes part of our spiritual DNA: whether we be lay person, priest, deacon or bishop. In our Baptismal Covenant, we all make the promise to "seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself."

This is why our bishop, after thirty years of relative absence, is seeking to re-establish the presence of deacons in the Church in New Hampshire. The re-introduction of this ministry is not a substitute for service by lay people or other orders of ordained ministry. We deacons aren't here to do a servant's work so others don't have to. And neither are we intended to be another layer of church hierarchy.

Rather, the aim of a deacon is to support, invite and represent our shared intentional desire to serve God's mission and people in the world. We are to be, in the words of our bishop, a spiritual and ecclesiastic ligament that helps hold the body of Christ together.

Bishop Rob is reintroducing deacons into our church in part to help us get back on the road when we find ourselves too preoccupied with being "The Church." A deacon's role is to encourage all of us into a fuller participation in the places where there is discomfort, challenge and need, and help us all to build better communities.

So if you're sitting in a pew right now and thinking to yourself, well, I could do that – then oh do we need to talk!

But whether you feel called to ordained ministry or not, Jesus today is inviting all of us, as he invited the twelve, to overcome our fears and accept the Good News of the Gospel, to let *diakonos* flow from us. It's our choice, of course. We don't have to. We can play it safe in our own greatness. But if you think that's the way to safety, know that Sam-I-am isn't going to stop inviting you until we all say:

I like green eggs and ham!
So I will eat them in a box.
And I will eat them with a fox.
And I will eat them in a house.
And I will eat them with a mouse.
And I will eat them here or there.
Say I will eat them anywhere!

Jesus is the great Sam-I-am: the one forever seeking us out to take our God-given talents to those in need, and Jesus is the one who is always, always, loving us.

So thank you! Thank you, Sam-I-am!

Or should we really say, thanks be to God!