

**B Proper 21, 2009**  
**Christ Church, Ridgewood New Jersey**  
**The Rev. David M. Rider, Seamen's Church Institute**  
**September 27, 2009**

**Mark 9:38-50**

It is great to be with you today as we engage the Holy Scriptures and prepare to receive an ingathering of beautiful scarves and caps for seafarers coming into our midst from around the world

Today in Mark's Gospel, we find a direct continuation last week's ethical teachings by Jesus to his disciples

If you were in church, you may remember Jesus' expansive words that whoever welcomes a child in my name welcomes me [Christ]

Today's passage goes with tougher love, when Jesus warns that anyone harming a vulnerable child should, in effect, get some cement boots to be thrown into the sea

Thankfully, Jesus tosses this preacher a lifeline by mentioning the sea, a perfect biblical segue to mention The Seamen's Church Institute!

Although Jesus ups the rhetorical ante—just how paradoxically, we are not sure—by arguing for the amputation of wayward body parts, Jesus emphatically demands ethical conduct on our part toward those who are vulnerable in society

Last week and today, Jesus employs children as example of vulnerability—last week, more expansively by talk of welcoming the child and this week, more ominously by staring down those who would hurt or exploit 'these little ones'

Although his language may be stark today, Jesus actually remains in a great frame of reference with Old Testament ethics that protect the widow and orphan—the vulnerable of society—as the keystone to right behavior

An entire strand of contemporary witness—liberation theology—pivots on this ethical proclamation that God protects and sides with the vulnerable over the mighty, whether with Moses in the great Exodus or amid our own contemporary battles between principalities and powers

In 1834, this spirit of divine protection and human advocacy began what we now know as The Seamen's Church Institute (our 175<sup>th</sup> anniversary)

The scene on the sailing docks of lower Manhattan was right out of *The Gangs of New York*, where life was cheap, brothels plentiful

With great moral fervor and a spirit of moral reform, our Victorian forbearers tapped into Jesus' ethical teaching to found hospitals, prison chaplaincies, child welfare organizations and, yes, seafarer ministries

The first SCI chaplains charged right into the worst of the gangs on the docks to grab exploited and gullible seafarers out of harm's way

It would not take much paraphrase of today's Gospel lesson to hear Jesus calling out, "for I tell you, whoever gives you a cup of water to a broken seafarer will by no means lose the reward"

Needless to say, much has changed in greater Manhattan since 1834—life in general and seafaring in particular—but vulnerability remains a constant reality for those who labor upon the waters of this earth

From hurricanes to winter blizzards, treacherous weather continues to take its toll, even as ships become stronger and technically safer

In a post- 9/11 world, port security initiatives create legal stumbling blocks to shore leave access and threaten to stigmatize an honorable workforce as closet terrorists

New outbreaks of piracy off Somalia and Nigeria hold many ships hijacked for ransom simultaneously

The first female seafarer has been held captive for several months, and just a few days ago pirates fatally shot a captain off Mogadishu

In the midst of this dangerous and lonely work—away from family for nine months at a time—the Church seeks to proclaim Good News, advocate for the dignity and protection of seafarers, and provide them with garments made with love—stitched one at a time—for the holidays

Living this close to Port Newark and driving regularly in I-95, I hope you know the difference between a truck trailer and a ship container

Next time you are out there—the Garden State Parkway does not count—look at the four top corners on the so-called truck trailer

If you notice big castings on the top four corners of the back rig, you are looking at a container likely going or coming from Port Newark

In 1956, the inventor Malcom McLean created the first shipping container that could mount on a road truck

The first container ship actually departed from Port Newark, heading to Houston in 1956, and the shipping world—arguably the entire world economy—changed forever

It certainly stimulated global trade and lower shipping costs for the 90% of everything we own that arrives to us at least in part by sea

But the more rapid turnaround times have forced quicker shore leaves for seafarers coming into port—what formally was 4-5 days now becomes 12-18 hours

That may be great for ship owners and the world economy, but it leaves seafarers more invisible to us and detached even further from the everyday opportunities to touch the ground, shop at a store or visit an exotic city

So SCI provides a seafarers' hospitality center in Port Newark and, as of July 1, in the Port of Oakland CA

There, seafarers can rest, find recreation and safe community for several hours at a time

They can speak with chaplains who also pay house calls on their ships

They can use Internet and phone cards to call family back home

They can engage with someone more likely to say "God loves you" than "Show me your identification"

Hospitality lies at the heart of Jesus' ethical teaching, yet hospitality occasionally can be insufficient in the world of justice and reconciliation

As an extension of the Episcopal Church's witness, SCI's Center for Seafarers' Rights provides attorneys who respond to individual cases of injustice while simultaneously advocating for seafarer rights internationally via the International Maritime Organization—part of the United Nations—and similar entities

We address shore-leave access violations, repatriation back home if a ship owner declares bankruptcy, wages, working conditions, medical care and the like

In the past few weeks, our Center for Seafarers' Rights has begun a multi-year post-piracy trauma assessment and treatment initiative to create Best Practices for seafarer clinical assessment after release, not to mention care of families during captivity

When justice is denied via hijacking, the Church works to promote healing and reconciliation upon release for the captive

This brings us to beautiful scarves and hats, knitted with love by parishioners at Christ Church and > 4000 around the country

With your labor of love that produces these beautiful scarves, we can tell seafarers that every scarf is knit by hand—no mass merchandising allowed

Especially for a young Filipino making his winter trek across the bone-chilling sea, the gifts represent human love and great utility—even the salty veteran seafarers begin asking about these gifts by this time of year

Gathering parish by parish, we give away > 17,000 Christmas gifts in Port Newark and along the inland river system

Each gift comes with love and prayer as an act of welcoming the vulnerable in Christ's name, a wonderful tradition that goes back more than 100 years

Harking back to the core of the Old Testament, Jesus commands us to love our neighbor as ourselves

We protect the widow and orphan, the vulnerable, the hurting, those in grief or any kind of trouble

We do so in prayer, with labors of love, with laws and advocacy that protect individuals and societies as a whole

In our individual witness—at work, with family, among our neighbors—and as a parish via our common outreach ministries, we welcome the stranger and protect his/her dignity

In doing so, we welcome Christ and avoid getting tossed into the sea

Remember the final words of today's Gospel passage (an apt image that permeates the waters of our oceans): Have salt in yourselves—avoid blandness and boredom

Serve Christ with passion, zeal and love; do acts of mercy and kindness—whether serving in soup kitchens or knitting scarves on cold winter nights—and in doing so, find peace with one another