

Children, being great, and following Jesus.

Pr 20 Yr C Mark 9:30-37 September 19, 2021

Rev. Peter Smith <http://www.stjamesuc.com>

"Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me." (Mk 9:37) The words of Jesus at the end of our gospel lesson seem simple enough to follow. We need to welcome children because when we do we welcome Jesus and we welcome God among us. And I hear this verse frequently used to talk about how precious children are and how we as a community of faith need to ensure we make a place for young people within the church.

And make no mistake we need to make a place for children within the church, we need to see the young people among us not merely for who they will become but who they are right now as disciples, and we need to be as open and as welcoming as we can be within the church. All those things are good, they are faithful, and they are something we need to keep striving toward in our life together. Yet as important as those things are I honestly don't think that is the main point Jesus is teaching the disciples. And I say that because of all the things that happen before we get to what Jesus says about welcoming the little child.

The lesson starts with Jesus teaching the disciples about his suffering, rejection, death and then his resurrection. Now he tells the disciples about what was going to happen numerous time and from the other side of the empty tomb we know exactly what Jesus is talking about- he is talking about the fact that the people are not going to accept him and what he is doing, that he is going to be rejected by the religious authorities, that he is going to die on the cross and be buried, and that on the third day he is going to rise from the grave. But the disciples haven't been through any of those things and the text makes it clear that they don't understand what Jesus is talking about but they are too afraid, and probably too embarrassed, to ask him what he means.

And Jesus knows that they do not understand what he is saying but Jesus keeps teaching them about his death and resurrection so that they remember his words. And I think so that they have those words to guide them through the difficult days leading up to Easter. And so that looking back after Easter, after they encounter the Risen Jesus, they will come to better understand the path Jesus took in his life.

But even more than telling them what is going to happen to him, Jesus talks about

the path is he walking so that the disciples see the path they are to take when the resurrection touches their lives. Because Jesus is calling them to follow and talks about his way of service and sacrifice, or dying to our old lives and being born again through God's grace.

Which brings us to the discussion the disciples have among themselves along the road. Because as they walk together heading toward where Jesus is leading them they start to argue with each other about how who is the greatest. And while Mark doesn't give us any details I expect each disciple has reasons for thinking that they are better than each and every other disciple. And when Jesus asks what they are talking about none of the disciples say a thing.

They're quiet because they know the focus in Jesus' ministry isn't on being great but on serving, not on being better than the other person but on making the life of the other person better, not on who is best but on how we can follow God's way. And so bringing them together Jesus teaches them that if you want to be first you have to be last and if you want to be greatest you have to be the servant of all. And while the text doesn't say I expect the disciples really don't understand what he is talking about here either because great people don't serve but they have servants and the last aren't first they are, well, last.

And those two things the disciples don't understand, the path that Jesus is walking to the cross and empty tomb and how to be great in your life of faith is why Jesus takes the child and says "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me." Which puts that verse in a much different light because now we are thinking about the path of discipleship and the question of who is the greatest when we talk about welcoming a child. And Jesus picks a child to focus the conversation on for a very specific reason.

Children are a gift. But the gift of a child doesn't come fully formed but needs years of our attention and sacrifice to grow and develop. Children have a great deal of potential. But to develop that potential we have to help them and give of ourselves so they can have. Children are wonderful. But children cost a great deal of money, time, energy, heartache, and sleep for those who care for them.

Because the truth is that children cost they don't provide. Children need rather than give. Children demand they don't offer. Anyone and everyone who spends time with children know and understand how much time, energy and resources children require.

And I know that parents and grandparents, families and communities, give all of those things for our children and many of us do that without a second thought. We give to them without hesitation. We treasure them, we embrace them, we welcome them within our lives because we love them and want the best for them. Which is exactly what Jesus wants us to be thinking when we consider the path he takes and the whole question of how we become great.

Because the kingdom of heaven, what God intends, the path Jesus calls us to follow is about service, about sacrifice, and about freely and completely giving of ourselves to others. And the best example of that here on earth is the way we care for and treat and raise children. We welcome them into our lives, we provide so they can flourish, we sacrifice so that they can succeed.

And when we take that attitude, that approach, that way in our lives of faith then we don't merely welcome the people around us we welcome Jesus. Because that is the path and the way Jesus calls us to follow as disciples. We welcome by giving, we welcome by making a place within the family, we welcome by caring for others selflessly.

And when we do that we have the right attitude, the right heart within ourselves to welcome Jesus and in doing so we open ourselves up and welcome God into our lives. And we begin to understand the path to the cross which Jesus calls us to follow.

A way where the focus isn't on what we can gain but on what we can give to change the world. A path which leads not to us being more powerful but on us being humble. A life which leads to an end which becomes a new beginning. Because we live caring for others and concerned about them not about our own place and status and we become great in the kingdom of heaven. For we are able to follow Jesus in the way he leads by dying to our old way of life and being born through the grace, the love, and the mercy of God.