

Just a Child

^{NRS} **Mark 9:33** Then they came to Capernaum; and when he was in the house he asked them, "What were you arguing about on the way?" ³⁴ But they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another who was the greatest. ³⁵ He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all." ³⁶ Then he took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms, he said to them, ³⁷ "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me."

^{NRS} **James 3:16** For where there is envy and selfish ambition, there will also be disorder and wickedness of every kind. ¹⁷ But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy. ¹⁸ And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace for those who make peace.

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When we were children, people would ask, "What do you want to be when you grow up? In my preschool years, policeman, fireman, and cowboy were likely answers. With the arrival of sputnik and junior high school, I was pointed more toward scientist or engineer. Some of my childhood heroes were Thomas Edison and George Washington Carver. We all had dreams of what we wanted to be when we grew up. Some of us fulfilled those dreams. Many of us found ourselves doing something else, something less exciting, something that seemed less important than our childhood dreams. We all knew that there was a pecking order of recognition and respect. A lot of us dreamed and aimed high, but landed lower. Even in school, many of us wanted to be in the "in crowd," but found ourselves to be out on the edge, or maybe out of the limelight entirely.

As we read today's text from Mark, we see the disciples have been arguing about these kinds of issues. Who is important – and who isn't? Who will lead? And who will trudge along behind? Who will see the path ahead – and who will only see the back of the person ahead of them? What drove them to argue about who was the greatest? Was it lust for power? Was it the need to be somebody special? When Jesus asked them what they were arguing about, they're silent. They didn't want Jesus to know that they've been jockeying for position.

In the Greek you can almost hear Jesus sigh with frustration. He sits down. This is the position that a teacher assumes to give a lesson. It's body language that means the same thing as when a teacher today stands up and walks to the podium. A lesson is going to follow. Then Jesus called the twelve. He summoned them. He spoke loudly to them. It's a moment that might be loosely translated as, "Hey! Get over here and gather 'round!" And then he makes one of those statements that go contrary to how we all think that the world works. "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all." That doesn't make a lot of sense. If you want to get ahead in life, you have to hustle. If you want to get into the good college you have to be out in front of the pack. If you want to move up in business, you've got to distinguish yourself by your drive and determination. In every aspect of the kingdom of mankind, from the Roman Empire to American democracy, from business to sports, from winning the race to winning the girl, the way to succeed is by hard work, stamina, standing out from the crowd, leading the way. So what's with this "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all?" We have such a hard time understanding that the Kingdom of God is not just the kingdom of mankind written in bigger letters. The Kingdom of Heaven isn't just the "world as we know it" elevated to a higher moral standard and nicer language. The Kingdom of God is about living differently – very differently from what most people would see as practical, as common sense, as the way to have the good life.

There was a time, when, if you moved to a new community, you looked around and found the church that would provide you with good social connections. If you were a businessperson, it was useful to sit down the pew from the corporate executive. If you were a nurse, going to church with doctors couldn't hurt your situation. If you were a lawyer, local office holders in the sanctuary might be good

connections, and company presidents might be potential clients. To the extent that these considerations were important, the kingdom of the world was more present than the kingdom of God. The church worked in the same fashion as any other social body. If we took any notice at all of how we and others were choosing which church to attend, we probably said something like, "Well, that's just the way the world works!" And we would have hit the nail on the head. The truth is that no church, no congregation, is totally immune to this sort of thinking. But in an emphatic way, Jesus tries to break us out of our assumptions. How things are - is not how things must be.

James, in the passage we heard a moment ago, reminds us that when we're concerned about who's ahead of whom, about control, about power, that there will be envy and selfish ambition. Instead of eagerness to be useful, eagerness to serve, and eagerness to love - there will be eagerness to control, eagerness to lead, eagerness to be in charge. Instead of selfless ambition, there is selfish ambition.

The next thing that Mark tells us is that Jesus took a child and said, "When you welcome a child, you welcome me." It's a picture that is filled with innocence, and sweetness, pure and simple. Last Sunday, I sat on the steps and talked with some younger saints. I held out my hands and Aden came to me and snuggled up against me. It was a special moment. After worship, more than one person talked about how cute Aden had been and how they wished that they had had a camera. I've got to tell you that with grandchildren half way across the continent, it was a wonderful moment for me as I got to hold her. My joy in living close to Cathy's family is immense, but it's tempered by the distance from our children and grandchildren. Time spent with our children and our grandchildren is precious, often more precious than we realize until later. So we read this scene in Mark of Jesus and the child, and we think of the song we learned in Sunday School, "Jesus loves the little children, all the children of the world." Jesus does. There is the lesson we learned from this text in Sunday School.

Every now and then, it's good to ask ourselves if we've learned anything since fifth grade Sunday School. If these few words in Mark are only about how sweet children are - and that Jesus loves children, then it's a bit odd that a story that appears to be about congregational leadership suddenly switches to a story about how Jesus loves us when we're little kids. In the ancient world, children had little value. Maybe that was because infant mortality was high and you didn't want to become too attached to them in case they didn't survive childhood. Maybe it was because they were another mouth to feed, but too young to help support the family. In any event, children weren't highly valued - until they moved from childhood to early adulthood.

The apostle Paul makes reference to this when he writes that "heirs, as long as they are minors, are no better than slaves.(Galatians 4:1)" Children, while still minors, were on the same level as slaves.

That sounds really cold-hearted and brutish to our ears today. But the remnants of that approach to childhood are not that far behind us. The vestiges of that mindset still linger. It wasn't so very many years ago that we outlawed child labor in factories and mills. It wasn't so very many years ago that we decided that children should be in school rather than in a sweatshop. And in most families, you don't have to go back more than a generation or two to a time when fathers took little notice of their children until they were old enough to hunt, fish, work in the fields, or marry off. Mothers were expected to nurture babies and little children. Fathers took little notice until the child was older and began to have value in their father's eyes.

Now that we know more about the ancient view of children, the story in Mark not only begins to have more continuity, it also has greater depth. Jesus and the disciples return to Capernaum. Jesus made his home in Capernaum (Matt. 4:13). Perhaps he lived with Peter's family. We don't know. But the text says, "when he was in the house" so we know that this scene takes place in a household, probably the place where Jesus lived. Jesus knows that the disciples have been arguing, but when he asks them what the argument was about, they're shamefaced and silent. So, Jesus assumes the traditional teaching posture - he sits down. He summons the disciples. It is a command appearance. He doesn't say, "Well, let's chat about this." No the tone is more like, "Come in, sit down, be quiet, because I'm going to tell you how the cow ate the cabbage! If you want to be important in God's kingdom, you must be like the last and least in the earthly, human way of ordering things. You must be a servant of all." The disciples hear the message, but their faces are blank. It's a paradoxical teaching. First is last. Up is down. Black is white.

It's all very confusing. It doesn't make sense. When lessons are difficult, sometimes stories make the point clear. Jesus told a lot of stories called parables.

But at this moment, Jesus doesn't tell a parable - he acts out a parable. He takes a child in the household. Maybe it was Peter's child. Maybe it was the child of a servant in this household. No matter. It was a little child. Children mostly went unnoticed. Maybe the child had been there all along, playing quietly in the dusty floor, drawing in the dust. Underfoot and unnoticed. Of no worth. And Jesus sets the child right in the middle of them. Front and center. And Jesus hugs the child, embraces the child. By his body language, he gives the child love and affection, and most of all - worth!

Some years ago, due to a mistake, a two-year-old child was summoned for jury duty in Houston, Texas. There's speculation that it might have been a divinely inspired event, because, you see, children are the jury that our civilization will have to stand before and be tried.¹ More than that, not only will our children judge us for how we treated them, our Lord has made it clear that he will judge us on how we treat our children - how we value them, how we respect them, how we nurture them. And our children aren't just those who are our flesh and blood. They include the child who happens to wander through the house where we are at the moment, the child who plays down the street, the child who swims in the city pool. The next time there's a school bond issue, remember that those children are children that Jesus hugs, and as you cast your vote, make sure the image of the child in your mind is bigger than the image of the dollar sign.

But if we only see children in this story in Mark, then we are still stuck in the fifth grade Sunday School of our childhood. The story continues as Jesus says, ^{NAB} **Mark 9:37** "Whoever receives one child such as this in my name, receives me; and whoever receives me, receives not me but the one who sent me." Here is this powerful, poetic, metaphorical proclamation. Some of our brothers and sisters use the phrase, "accept Jesus." That's what this verse is about, but let me try to rephrase it so that the words may not carry a narrow meaning for some of us. Jesus is saying, "When you welcome me, when you live with me on your mind and me in your heart, when I become a constant presence in your way of seeing and acting, then you're welcoming God and living in God's realm. You're a citizen in God's own kingdom. And, Jesus, embracing this no-name, this just-happened-to-be-there insignificant child without age or gender, Jesus says, "See, when you receive one who is like this, when you welcome and love and embrace and care about all those who are least among us, like I do," Jesus says, "Then you are accepting me and you are welcoming God into your life." James says that is wisdom, wisdom from above that "is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy."

Jesus takes the directory of the church and reshuffles the order. We put it in alphabetical order to be "fair," or at least to be organized. But, when someone asks us who belongs to our church, we're likely to start with the bank president, then list the lawyer, on down the social pecking order, and never even mention the guy who does yards or the woman who keeps children in her home, the child who wiggles in worship, or the person fading away in a bed across town. But Jesus flips the list. Someday, some December, we'll watch a movie titled *A Christmas without Snow*. On the surface, it's about a small, struggling, inner city church. One of the most righteous characters in the movie is an old woman who isn't a member. She's among the least, socially, financially, and educationally. But she's precisely the sort of person that Jesus would call on to lead the parade through the gates of the New Jerusalem. Amen

¹ Told by Halford E. Luccock, *St. Mark, Interpreter's Bible, V7*, (Nashville, Abingdon, 1951) p 788