

Welcoming the Child

Mark 9:30-37

Ordinary 25

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³⁰They went on from there and passed through Galilee. Jesus did not want anyone to know it, ³¹for he was teaching his disciples, saying to them, “The Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him, and three days after being killed, he will rise again.” ³²But they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him.

³³Then they came to Capernaum; and when he was in the house he asked them, “What were you arguing about on the way?” ³⁴But they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another who was the greatest. ³⁵He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, “Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.” ³⁶Then 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.”

“Hey you – get out of here!”

The scene was an elaborate coffee hour at United Presbyterian Church. The table was covered with fresh pastries. The man waving his finger was a retired stockbroker. His wife had just finished arranging the table and setting out the coffee. And he was wagging his finger at a three-year-old boy with a fist full of Danish pastry. Remember what he said? “Hey you – get out of here.”

It was a brief scene. A lot of people missed it. Some would dismiss it as being perfectly in character; Harry was always yelling at somebody. That is why he went to church. But his words have echoed in my memory for the past twenty-four years. From the sound of it, he was chasing away a little boy with cream-filled hands and a chocolate moustache.

That story comes to mind when I hear this story from the Gospel of Mark. Jesus takes a child - a little child - and put the child right in the midst of adults. To dramatize his message, he hugs the little one and says to the church, “Whoever welcomes such a child in my name welcomes me. Whoever welcomes me welcomes God.”

This is how Jesus teaches his own people about himself. Right before this, he has told the disciples for a second time about his death and resurrection. He will be humbled even further than he already is. On the cross, he will be regarded as small and insignificant. All the twelve disciples can do is counter by arguing among themselves which one of them is the biggest and the best. That’s when he welcomes the child right into their midst.

Now I’m fairly certain that the guy in Jersey meant well. For all we know, his wife might have picked up the pastries on her way to church. They probably cost a lot of money. And if a youngster or two disrupted her hard work, he was only trying to be supportive.

But I still can’t get his harsh words out of my memory. Pointing to a child, he said, “Hey you! Get out of here!” If Jesus is our Lord, and we take him seriously, those are the last words we should ever say to a child. Especially in church.

Most of us can agree. We need children, if only to perpetuate the human family and its institutions. The church is always one generation away from extinction. Like the Jews before us, we are commanded to teach our faith to those who come after us before we are gone. We know this. We agree with this. We say it at every baptism. But it's one thing to say the words. It's another to live them.

It was hard for the twelve disciples. They don't get it. Here in chapter nine, Jesus welcomes a child. In the very next chapter, his followers want to shoo the children away. The kids are flocking to Jesus. The children come in response to his gracious invitation. They come out of their own human needs. And the disciples say, "Get these kids out of here."

Mark says Jesus grew indignant. In Greek, it says he blew a fuse. "Let the little children come to me," he said. Or maybe you learned it in the old King James Version, "suffer the little children to come unto me." In ancient English, the word "suffer" meant "to permit" or "to allow." So he's saying "Take away the roadblocks." Remove the obstacles. His word still stands from chapter nine: "Whoever welcomes a child in my name welcomes me. Whoever welcomes me welcomes God."

So today, we think about welcoming children. At the heard of this pronouncement is a central spiritual practice. And that brings us to the Quiz Portion of today's sermon. If I asked you to name the primary spiritual things that Christian people are called to do, what would you say? What's on the short list?

Well, there's prayer. Worship. Read the Bible. Care for others. Those might be among the top four. But there's actually something more. According to Jesus, one of the primary spiritual tasks of our life is to welcome. To welcome. Specifically he calls us to welcome children. To welcome a child in the name of Jesus is, in essence, to welcome Jesus himself. Think of how he comes to us: he comes in the vulnerability of a Christmas Child. He comes in the joy of a child at play. He comes, not in blistering power or brutal authority, but in smallness, specificity, God as a local boy. And that's why Jesus is easy to miss.

Somebody told me about a bumper sticker that they saw: "Start seeing motorcycles." She said, "I didn't know I wasn't seeing motorcycles, then I realized that was the point. How do you begin to see something you didn't know you were missing?"¹

When you wade through all the statistics of our Presbyterian denomination, and when you hear all the critics say we're about half the size we used to be, you might discover that there's one large reason for it all. It has little to do with our choice of music. It has little to do with our low birth rate. One of the major reasons for the gradual shrinking of the Presbyterian Church is we haven't done a real good job of hanging on to our children.

Part of that is the way we train our ministers. My big seminary with its 900 million dollar endowment resisted a child care center for fifteen years. And when I was younger, they called

¹ Mary Hinkle, "Seeing Things," *The Christian Century*, September 6, 2003, p. 19.

in graduates like me, and ask, “Why don’t any of the young alumni come back to campus for seminars?” For fifteen years, we said, “You are not welcoming to ministers who have children.” In my opinion, it is still a blind spot at my school. And it could be a growth opportunity.

As some of you know, this is my last year on the board of our national Presbyterian conference center at Stony Point, New York. I’m ready for a break. I love that place, but it’s been a struggle to keep the doors open and the budget balanced. This summer I was visiting Montreat, another of our conference centers in North Carolina, and the place was jammed. It’s on a small lake in the middle of the mountains, and there were kids everywhere. Ah – I called the director of Stony Point, and I said, “I think I know why Montreat is thriving.” He said, “Why’s that?” And I said, “They have paddleboats and a playground.”

I wasn’t kidding. Think of what that means: who goes out in a paddleboat? Children and their parents. What does a playground announce? It says loud and clear, “We expect children.”

Jesus takes a child into the center of his disciples. There are two Greek words in the New Testament for the verb “to take.” One is to seize or to lay hands upon, as in the Garden of Gethsemane, when the soldiers take Jesus – they grab him, in other words. If he were a child, that would be creepy and really illegal. When Jesus “takes” the child, it’s the other Greek word, which means to receive. It is a passive verb; as in God gives, and we receive. That’s the sense of welcoming what God gives us. And that’s the importance of welcoming a child as a central spiritual task of the faith.

One of the people who saw this most clearly was a man who never had any children of his own. His name was Henri Nouwen, and he was a priest and spiritual writer. In one of his books, he talks about hospitality, and he focuses on children. Listen to what he says:

It belongs to the center of the Christian message that children are not properties to own and rule over, but gifts to cherish and care for. Our children are our most important guests, who enter in our home, ask for careful attention, stay for a while and then leave to follow their own way. Children are strangers whom we have to get to know. They have their own style, their own rhythm, and their own capacities for good and evil. They cannot be explained by looking at their parents. It is not surprising to hear parents say about their children, “They all are different, none is like the other, and they keep surprising and amazing us.” ...

Children carry a promise with them, a hidden treasure that has to be led into the open through education in a hospitable home. It takes much time and patience to make the little stranger feel at home, and it takes a while for parents to love their children. ... We can even say that the love between parents and children develops and matures to the degree that they can reach out to each other and discover each other as fellow human beings, who have much to share and whose differences in age, talents and behavior are much less important than their common humanity.²

² Henri Nouwen, *Reaching Out* (New York: Doubleday, 1975) 81-82.

To receive a child is to receive a fellow human being. It means setting aside any false superiority of age, and receiving others as they really are. We are called to receive them, not for how we want them to be, but for who they are, right now. They are children. And if you're quibbling with this, let me say that if all of us live long enough, we eventually become like children: vulnerable, dependent, and small. In fact, my mom said just yesterday that she's an inch shorter than she used to be.

Henri Nouwen goes on to say, "The church is one of the few places left where we can meet people who are different than we are but with whom we can form a large family. Taking our children out of the house and bringing them to the church for baptism is a reminder of the larger community in which they are born and offers them a free space to grow to maturity without fear."³

We have a real opportunity in our church: we can grow spiritually by receiving children into our midst. That's the heart of what I want to say today. There's a straight line in Jesus' thinking: whoever welcomes a child in his name welcomes God. As he puts it, "If you welcome a child, you welcome me. If you welcome me, you welcome the One who sent me."

That's the opportunity for our church. It doesn't matter how young or old you are. It doesn't matter if you have children of your own or if you don't. Our church is the community where his words come true: if we welcome the child, it opens us to welcome God.

Remember what man said at the church in New Jersey? He wagged his finger at a child and said, "Get out of here." I am haunted by his words, and I wonder how that attitude has affected his church. Their sanctuary seats six-hundred; now they're getting about forty-five on a Sunday. Do you think there's a connection? I do.

Over the next year, I'm going to try to challenge us a number of times to keep us from becoming an R-rated church. You know what R-rated means: only for age 17 and over. If we look around the sanctuary, sometimes it looks R-rated. As a church, we can talk about being inclusive, and that's a wonderful abstract concept; but where are the children? How can we welcome them?

This is a strong and capable church. We have so many smart and generous people who are able to do so much. But the fact is our children's Sunday School is one-quarter of the size it was when I came here fifteen years ago, and our town is not shrinking. I have to swallow pretty hard at that; all of us do. Our church excels in so many things: our new challenge is to excel at welcoming children.

This is not one person's job. This is not the concern of one committee. No, it is God's calling for every one of us in this room: to invite and to welcome. To make a place for all whom God sends to us. To receive every little one as a Holy Gift.

³ Ibid, 83

Like I said, we're going to keep at this. We're going to keep whacking away until it sinks in. This is our church's new direction. In my ministry, I'm not going to support a lot of things that detract from it. Jesus Christ is calling our congregation to receive children at all levels of our life together, and therefore, to receive God.

What does this mean? I don't know yet. It's going to be an adventure for us all. Today I begin by putting it out there. And this journey begins by welcoming the children who are already into our midst, and making room for more of them. And that means making room for the people in their households. And for us to grow, spiritually and numerically, we can't ever act like an adults-only church.

This is going to be an adventure, particularly for those of us who thought their time with children was over. When it comes to kids, when is our turn ever over? It is such a privilege to welcome them, and to love them into the kingdom of God. As Jesus reminds us, the first step of welcoming them is seeing them.

With that in mind, let me close with the words of an old prayer by poet Ann Weems:

I celebrate children

Who laugh out loud
Who walk in the mud and dawdle in puddles
Who put chocolate fingers anywhere
Who like to be tickled
Who scribble in church
Who whisper in loud voices
Who sing in louder voices
Who run – and laugh when they fall
Who cover themselves with Band-Aids
Who squeeze the toothpaste all over the bathroom
Who slurp their soup
Who chew cough drops
Who ask questions
Who give us sticky, paste-covered creations
Who want their pictures taken
Who don't use their napkins
Who bury their goldfish, sleep with the dog, scream at their best friends,
Who hug us in a hurry and rush outside without their hats.

I celebrate children who are so busy living that they don't have time for our hang-ups,

And I celebrate adults who are as little children.