

Sermon: September 20, 2009

Scripture: Proverbs 31:10-31
Mark 9:30-37

Title: "The Importance of Welcoming Children"

Call to Worship Psalm 1

Happy are those who do not follow the advice of the wicked,
Or take the path that sinners tread, or sit in the seat of scoffers.

**But their delight is in the law of the Lord,
And on his law they meditate day and night.**

They are like trees planted by streams of water, which yield their
Fruit in its season. And their leaves do not wither.

In all that they do, they prosper.

The wicked are not so, but are like chaff that the wind drives away.

Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment,

Nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous.

**For the Lord watches over the way of the righteous,
But the way of the wicked will perish.**

Hymn: #151 Crown Him With Many Crowns
269 O God of Bethel, by Whose Hand
(add verse between 3 & 4)
*Keep us from claiming special place,
Don't let us be beguiled;
Give us humility and faith,
As like a little child.*

#311 We Meet You, O Christ

Prayer of Confession:

O Lord, if we climbed the highest mountain or sank to the depths of the sea, you would be there. There is no place we can go, no condition we can adopt, no attitude we can assume that would put us outside your pale. Why then, Almighty God, do we attempt to live as if you were not around? We confess that we like to think of you as being confined to the walls of this sanctuary. We confess that when we are away from this Holy Place, we live our lives as if you are not there. Forgive us, Lord, for confining you to certain times and places. Teach us that you are our constant companion and that you are concerned about the totality of our lives. We pray in the name of the always present Christ. Amen.

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At the beginning of the Summer months I asked you to suggest possible topics and scripture passages that you would like to hear addressed from the pulpit. Several of you responded and at least once I have centered a sermon around one of your suggestions. Today’s sermon touches another of the topics which you suggested. Now, I have no way of knowing who made the suggestion, because I did not ask you to sign the suggestion forms. Perhaps the individual who made the suggestion will recognize it. You wrote: “Wisdom of parenting – reinforce the gift of our children.”

Well, this morning’s Gospel Lesson and next week’s Gospel Lesson from the Mark both speak of children within the context of Christ’s ministry and teachings. So, it is important for us to grasp what is going on as Mark tells the story of Jesus.

We need to begin by understanding the message that Jesus was teaching his disciples. Note that the passage tells us that Jesus and his disciples had passed through Galilee. They were headed somewhere. That somewhere was Jerusalem and their journey was timed to get them to Jerusalem in time for the Feast of the Passover. To be in Jerusalem for the Feast of the Passover was like being in New Orleans for Marti Gras. Or like being in the stadium for the Super Bowl. Or like being in Washington DC for the inauguration of the President. Or being in New York’s Time Square for New Year’s Eve. Well, actually it was like all of these put together. So, when Mark tells us that they “went on from there” we need to go back and reread the previous passage. And there we discover that Jesus had been teaching and healing in the villages of Caesarea Philippi. His message there was that he would suffer and die

and rise again on the third day. You will remember it was among the people of Caesarea Philippi that Jesus admonished:

“If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their lives will lose it and those who lose their lives for my sake, and for the sake of the Gospel, will save it.”

It was a tough lesson to learn. This thing of becoming a follower is not all roses and sweet tea.

Peter was so vocal in his hostility to Christ’s message that Jesus had to turn on him and say:

“Get behind me Satan. For you are setting your mind not on divine things, but on human things.”

But now, in our passage for the morning, Jesus is on the road. Moving relentlessly toward his destiny. Mark notes that Jesus wanted some seclusion from the crowds. He needed time with his close disciples; time for teaching; time to prepare them for what is to come. And they clearly did not understand. But instead of asking for clarification, they kept quiet. Harry Adams, Professor of Biblical Studies at Yale Divinity School suggests that

We can understand their hesitation if we discern that they had heard enough to get some idea of what he was talking about, but did not want to believe that he really meant what they were hearing.

Adams goes on to explain that

“ there are times when we are silent because we do not want to hear what we fear we might hear. It is easier to keep quiet, to pretend that we do not understand , than to ask and run the risk of hearing something we might not like.”

Martha Moore-Keish, Professor of Theology at Columbia Seminary, suggests that this silence on the part of the disciples points up

“The deep divide between human knowledge and divine revelation. This passage... highlights the human difficulty in understanding the ways of God, because we are not God.”

Those disciples were all too human. And they dealt with Christ’s pronouncement of his ultimate fate the way that many of us would deal with it. Stone Silence! You rush your one year old to the Doctor’s office. He has been lethargic for several weeks. At his one year old birthday party he sat there and cried when we set the cake in front of him with one candle in it. He had lost five pounds over the past month. And the Doctor does a blood test and pronounces: “Diabetes.” You stand there in silence at first. The words are too ominous to comprehend. Your mind is racing. How can that be? Certainly not my child. There’s been a mistake. Yes, I can understand why those disciples were silent. Their level of knowledge was on a different plane than that of Jesus. They were afraid that what they heard was what they heard. It did not compute with their preconceived notions of what The Messiah was all about. Peter’s outburst and Christ’s rebuke had shocked them. It was not what they wanted to hear.

When they arrived at the little village of Capernaum on the northern tip of the Sea of Galilee, they stop for the evening at a friend’s house, Jesus asks them a question.

“What were you arguing about on the way?”

And Mark says:

“But they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another who was the greatest.”

Can you imagine that? As they walked along, the disciples dropped back and were carrying on a discussion, more than a discussion, a heated

debate about who among them would be the greatest when Jesus came into His Kingdom. Or, perhaps they were discussing who would take over as leader if and when the authorities eliminated Jesus. There had been other charismatic leaders who met their fates at the hands of the Roman Authorities. Real revolutionaries who gathered a following of warriors with the intent of running the Romans out. You can almost hear them arguing among themselves as they walked along the dusty road to Capernaum; “Who among us will take over leadership when Jesus is gone? Who is the second in command? Jesus wasn’t even dead yet, and they were attempting to set up an order of succession. No wonder they grew silent when Jesus questioned them. But Jesus knew!

John Calvin, in commenting on this passage laments:

“So great is the influence of preconceived opinion, that it brings darkness over the mind in the midst of the clearest light.

Those disciples were caught in their preconceived notions of order and authority. Calvin’s comments suggest another way to view the disciples’ discussion about who is the greatest.

There was a discontinuity between Israel’s expectation of a Messiah and Jesus’ way of being Messiah. The disciples failed to understand Jesus’ teachings because they have inherited a particular understanding of who the Anointed One was going to be, an understanding that did not include suffering and death. Their eyes were clouded by previous expectations. They were blinded by old teachings and expectations that they could not get beyond. And Jesus’ teachings about the struggles and death he was to experience flew in the face of their preconceived understanding. For instance, the simple idea that in every organization there has to be a pecking order. Someone has to be first, and someone has to be second in line. Someone has to be the favored one, and someone has to bring up the tail end.

Think in terms of the family. Suppose you came from a family with twelve children. Is the eldest in charge? Does the first born call the

shots for the rest of the children. Did mom love you the best? What was your birth order and where do you stand in the pecking order. How many Irish families passed their farms on to the oldest male simply because the laws of primogenitor declared that is how it is done? Meanwhile, younger children had to leave Ireland and settle in Canada, or Australia or America simply because they were on the lower end of the pecking order.

Think in terms of The Church. How many congregations have I served where one person has held the position of gatekeeper for several decades, and his father held it before him. You know what I mean. Congregations where families have assumed leadership roles and refuse to pass the leadership role on to younger people or to new families. We are so constricted by old tapes that run in our heads.

So, Jesus calls his disciples to come and sit at his feet. And he says: Look, haven't you learned anything from me yet. Whoever will be first among you must be the servant. And then to give a living demonstration of just what he means he reaches over and picks up a little child who just happened to be in the room. And 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”.

You were wondering when I was going to get around to children. Well, here it is. Jesus breaks all the old traditions that dictated that children did not count. Hebrew society counted children as non-persons, or as not-yet-persons, possessions of the father in the household. For Jesus to hold up a little child as an emblem of living in God's household, and as a stand-in for Jesus himself, was to offer serious challenge to social norms of the day.

In the very next passage, next week's lection from Mark, Jesus admonishes that

If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea.

And later on in Mark 10:13 we read that

People were bringing little children to him in order that he might touch them; and the disciples spoke sternly to them. But when Jesus saw this, he was indignant and said to them, Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the Kingdom of God belongs. Truly I tell you whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it. And he took them up in his arms laid his hands on them, and blessed them.

Isn't it interesting that in the three passages in Mark where children are lifted up, it is in reaction to disciples who would put them down. Or in reaction to disciples whose faith was stuck in the traditions of yesteryear?

In the Hebrew language the words for children and the words for servant are closely linked. Only the addition of a vowel and a punctuation point turns the word for child into the word for servant. The lowest end of the pecking order. And Our Lord says that if you and I want to be a disciple of His, we need to be like a little child. The young and the vulnerable in our society, the ones who are not honored with the good seats at the feast. The ones who receive the blunt edge of the economy.

This passage should not be used to whip up sentimental thoughts about the innocence of childhood. And certainly not a passage in which Jesus cuddles sweet little children and welcomes them to Sunday School. There is more power here.

This passage gives credence to the astounding idea that children are important in God's Kingdom. Counter to the socially accepted standards of his day, Jesus lifted up children and placed them in the center of theological understanding. If you cannot welcome children and make a

place for them in your faith community, then there is a real possibility that you simply do not understand what God's Kingdom is all about.

Children have a place at the table. That is why we Presbyterians, many years ago, allowed for young children who have been taught the meaning of the Lord's Supper to take communion with their parents. Not like when I came along. We sat there, feeling left out, as the plate was passed in front of us. And not until we took communicant's class at age 12 were we allowed to partake.

Now we have eight little children who are meeting with their families on Sunday mornings for training, so that they will be admitted to The Supper.

And that is why the Book of Order allows for a Youth Elder to serve on the Session. Because in God's great plan the faith and input of children tell us something about the Theological life of a congregation. And that is one of the reasons it is wise to include a youth on the PNC, because any serious candidate for this pulpit will want to know the place and respect we have for our children here at Altavista. If we say that we believe in Children's ministry, does that mean that we do ministry to children, or does that mean we involve children in doing ministry along side of us?

You know why I love doing a children's sermon as part of the worship service. Because it is a very honest acknowledgement of the fact that children count. We cannot simply shuffle them off to the back room for their own lesson without first speaking God's word on a level that they can understand. Letting them know that they have a place in the total life of the congregation.

And you know something. I am constantly amazed at how often the children will grasp the deeper implications of a message. Their minds are always thinking and questioning. They are not afraid (like the disciples) to ask questions and to express their feelings. Some day I'm

going to write a book about the comments that little children have made during children's sermons.

The point is, that children have something to contribute to the life of the congregation. They have gifts. Some of our children are learning to play instruments. Do we have to wait until they are master musicians before they can contribute to the worship? Of course not. And we already know how a twelve year old can stand before a congregation and lead us in our liturgy. Thanks be to God for children. They are not just the future. They are the present. And we need to learn that when our adult senses are stuck in tradition and habits, children can ask just the right question to shock us out of our narrow visions. You see, children haven't had time to build up walls yet. And they haven't been locked in to preconceived notions yet. And they are open books upon which the Grace of Christ can be inscribed without interference from old social norms that may serve to block that Grace.

I know that is frightening to parents. We want to be in control. We want to mold our children so that they become carbon copies of us. Certainly we don't want them to strike out in different directions than us. And we want to protect them from all the dangers which could beset them. But you don't do that by locking them up. You guide them by cutting them free to learn and experience life, always being there to help them when they ask. And certainly we want them to return and ask questions and discuss issues. If they come back like the disciples, silent and afraid to answer, then we know something is wrong.

But most of all, as we adults grow older and become more locked into our beliefs and habits, children become the reminder that we were once like them. All of us, young and innocent, ready to learn and experience. Full of enthusiasm for life we once were. And hopefully, when we welcome children, we are welcoming them in the name of the Christ and encouraging them to maintain that childlike faith which you and wish from time to time we still had.

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