

FIFTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

September 20, 2015

Mark 9:30-37

"Childlike – not Childish"

Pastor Saul Stensvaag

The disciples **just don't get it, do they?** Three times in Mark's gospel Jesus makes a **clear prediction** that **he must suffer and die**, and on the third day be raised up. **But they just don't get it. It's almost comical.**

The first time, as soon as Jesus began to explain the fate awaiting him in Jerusalem, Peter took him aside and rebuked him, saying, No! That can never happen!

The second time, in today's text, the disciples *"... did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him."* And then, even though he's just told them about his passion, death and resurrection, they start arguing about which of them was the greatest. **Can you believe it?**

The reaction after the **third prediction** is no better.

As we look at the disciples' inability to understand Jesus' words about his crucifixion and death, we ask, **"What's going on here? Aren't they listening to him?"** It's easy to criticize them. But remember, **we have the benefit** of reading these words **on the other side of Good Friday and Easter.** We know how the story ends.

One reason the disciples didn't understand what Jesus was talking about was that it was **so contrary to the image of a Messiah** they had grown up with. They **expected a powerful and glorious king – a freedom fighter.**

Instead, they got a **suffering servant** – a man who **eats with sinners**, who **doesn't resist** when he's arrested, and who **silently accepts the humiliation and pain** of being nailed to the cross.

Only **after the crucifixion and resurrection**, are the **disciples eyes opened** to understand what it means to say Jesus is savior.

But here, in this text, they **react like foolish children.** And they get **side-tracked by a silly argument about who's the greatest.** It's like they're playing King of the Hill. It's so childish!

But, like children caught with their hand in the cookie jar, at least they have the grace to be embarrassed when Jesus asks them what they were arguing about.

They knew enough to realize that **their argument was completely out of line with what Jesus had been talking about.** This was **one of the lowest points** in their **relationship with Jesus.**

But Jesus knows his teaching about true greatness is **hard for anyone to understand.**

Because saying that the **one who wants to be greatest must become last – a servant to all** – this idea **turns the world's way of thinking and doing business UPSIDE DOWN AND INSIDE OUT.**

So when the disciples argued about who was the most important among the twelve, they were **simply expressing a very basic human concern.**

They wanted to know where each one stood in relation to the others.

And so Jesus decides to show how **radically different things are in God's kingdom** by using **a surprising and, no doubt, surprised, visual aid.**

He takes a little child in his arms and says, *"Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me."*

Don't you love the irony here?

The disciples have been acting like foolish children. And so Jesus shows them that as his followers, they are to be child-like, but not child-ish.

This was a radical action, given the role of children in that society.

In twenty-first-century America, some people have the **romantic idea of the child as perfectly innocent and perfectly natural.** (Of course, those who hold such views usually don't have children of their own.)

But in Jesus' time, both in legal and other matters, children were simply seen as totally defenseless and totally dependent on the family.

So, if a person was out to improve their social status, they'd have **nothing to gain** from **helping a child**, since **a child has nothing to offer in return.**

But **that's exactly the point** Jesus is making.

"Whoever welcomes – whoever receives – a child like this in my name," Jesus says, ***"welcomes and receives me."***

Christian **hospitality**, Christian **service** is not about **serving and welcoming only those who are important.**

Rather, Christian hospitality and service is about **welcoming the least, the lost, and all those society sees as unimportant**; it's about **welcoming them in Jesus' name.** When we do this, Jesus says, we are **welcoming Jesus himself.**

Incidentally, you have an opportunity to show that you understand this truth by giving to the ELCA Disaster Relief Fund to help the refugees in Europe.

They certainly qualify as the least and the lost. And your offering can be a symbolic way to welcome them in Christ' name.

My previous congregation was in the **wealthy suburb of Edina**, and there were always plenty of *"very important persons"* in the pews: company CEOs and high-powered lawyers.

I'll never forget the Sunday that **Jim Wacker**, who had **just moved to town as the new Gopher football coach**, showed up at our church for worship. The **reaction** of a few was **almost comical**. You'd have thought the Messiah had returned, as they practically fell over each other trying to welcome him!

I remember one usher who came **running up to me** before the procession started, frantically looking for the Senior Pastor.

After he found him he pointed out our very important guest and said, *"That's Jim Wacker, the new Gopher coach. Be sure to visit with him after worship. It would be quite a **feather in our cap** if he joined our church."*

Now I wanted to ask, *"Why on earth would we make any greater effort to welcome Jim Wacker than any other visitor?"*

But you see, just like the foolish disciples, we often find it **hard to understand Jesus' words about greatness** and the **values of the kingdom** of God.

Incidentally, I was **proud of my colleague that morning**, because he **didn't** rush over after worship to welcome Jim Wacker. He probably knew that plenty of members would already be doing that.

Instead, he **looked around to see if there were any "nobodies" who might need welcoming**.

By doing so, he showed he understood Jesus' lesson about greatness.

As Christians, we're **not called to strive for greatness** or to serve only **important people**, whatever that means.

Instead, as Christians, we are **called to be servants of all**.

We are **called to be concerned** about those who **have no power** or **prestige**; those who **need our help.**

In today's Gospel text, Jesus tells us that whenever we welcome or serve anyone who's defenseless, helpless, or powerless, we are **welcoming and serving Christ himself.**

In Mark 10, Jesus again uses a child to teach an important truth about the kingdom.

The **disciples have been shooin children away** from their master, since **they think he's too important** to be bothered by them.

But Jesus gets angry and tells them to let the children come. Then he says, *"whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will not enter it."*

Today's text tells us to **receive children.** The Mark 10 story teaches us that we must **receive the kingdom like a child.**

Remember, children symbolize **dependency and helplessness.** They are VERY GOOD AT RECEIVING, since they **have no other choice.**

When we look at the gift of salvation, we know that we are **no different from children** as far as our **ability to do anything to claim or earn salvation.**

We are **totally dependent** on the grace of God, just as a baby depends on others for food and protection. We can do nothing but **receive salvation as a gracious gift.**

And so this metaphor of the child carries a double meaning.

When we **become child-like** – that is, when we **admit our weakness and our dependence** – then we can **receive the free and gracious gift of salvation** in Jesus Christ.

And **after we've received this gift,** Christ can **cure our hunger for power and prestige,** so that we can **welcome and serve the children** in our society – all those folks of any age who are **powerless, defenseless, and totally dependent on others.**

For in serving and welcoming people such as this, we are **serving and welcoming Jesus Christ himself.**

CHILDREN ARE A GREAT SYMBOL FOR THESE TRUTHS ABOUT THE KINGDOM OF GOD. That's why I'm **so delighted** that we have so many children **join us in worship every Sunday.**

☺ Children:

THANK YOU ALL FOR COMING.

☺ YOU'RE VERY SPECIAL TO US.

We **might not always do a good job of showing it**, but we know that **without you our worship experience would be poorer.**

Your presence here reminds us that the **kingdom of God is for all people, not just for powerful, important, grownup people.**

And your presence reminds us that when it comes to God's love and grace, we can't do anything to deserve it. We can only receive it like children.

In closing, I'd like to share with you some words of Frederick Buechner about this story:

The child stands there wide-eyed, more than a little scared, much more than a little embarrassed.

...He wishes he'd had time to get the hair out of his eyes and button up his shirt, or at least to spit out his bubblegum.

*He'd give a lot as he waits there to be **as tall as his big brother** or **as smart as his Uncle Joe**. He wishes he were **anything worth being** or **knew anything worth knowing**.*

Perhaps something like that is what Jesus meant by humble. ...The small boy ...knew who his elders and betters were. He was ready to take whatever they had to give and only hoped they wouldn't hold the bubblegum against him.

*"If it's the Kingdom of Heaven you're interested in," Jesus says, "you've got to be like this child." It's not so much a prerequisite or condition as it's simply a practical expedient. **Just COME AS YOU ARE AND HOLD OUT YOUR HANDS.**"*

Prayer:

Dear Lord, help us to learn from children how to be good at receiving your gifts of grace. And help us to welcome and serve the helpless and powerless in our world. Amen.