

Green Hill Presbyterian Church
“Welcoming Children”
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Lesson: Mark 9:30-37

Jesus was teaching the disciples about his impending betrayal, and suffering, and death, and eventual resurrection, and they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask. One of the characteristics of Mark’s gospel is that the disciples tend to be portrayed as being slow, as being thick, as being blind, as forever not understanding what was going on. In our passage today, Jesus speaks of his suffering and death and the response of the disciples is not quiet dismay or fear or group depression. Rather they begin an argument about who is the greatest. They completely miss the point. Yet, Mark is good news because these “dunderheads” are the ones chosen by Jesus to be disciples. They mess up, but remain disciples. That is true for us as well. The good news of Mark is that for all of our blindness, all of our slowness, all of our lack of understanding, all of our failure, all our bull-headedness, we remain disciples. Jesus didn’t choose the best and the brightest. He chose whom he chose and still is doing the same. He chooses real human beings with all their contradictions and failures and gives them what they need to be his followers.

Jesus speaks of his betrayal and suffering. The response of the disciples is to argue about who is the greatest. It sounds like a bunch of school kids. “I’m stronger than you!” “No, you aren’t.” “Yes I am!” So Jesus calls them all together. He explains that if you want to be first, then go to the end of the line. If you want to be greatest, then become a servant. He offers an entirely new understanding of what it means to be great, of what it means to be first. And to give them a concrete example, he then takes a child, and puts the kid in the middle of the circle, and wraps his arms around the child. It’s quite a picture.

Most of us have learned that Jesus had a particular fondness for children. When the disciples tried to keep the kids away, Jesus rebuked them and took the little ones up into his arms and blessed them, saying, “Let the little children come to me; don’t stop them. To such as these belongs the kingdom of God.” There are certain characteristics of children that we strive to reclaim: the sense of wonder, of discovery, of awe; the sense of trust and their playfulness. We know that incredible feeling deep down inside, when lots of kids come up and gather here in front on Sunday morning—Something feels right, even if one of those kids gets completely distracted by the image of sprinkles on a chocolate ice cream cone. We are brought closer to God by their presence. What better sign is there of God’s continuing love, than the presence of children in our midst? However, that is not the point Jesus makes with his disciples in this story today. He wrapped his arms around a little child and said: “Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me, welcomes not me but the one who sent me.” Children you see were at the bottom of the pole in that society. Over and against those disciples who were arguing about who was the greatest, Jesus takes the least, the lowest, the one without any rank, and says that when we welcome this one, we welcome Jesus himself.

Hospitality. If we want to welcome Jesus into our lives, then welcome the children. Welcome the nobodies. Welcome the outcasts and the strangers. Welcome the foreigners. Welcome the immigrants. Welcome those who have the least standing. Welcome those from whom we can expect nothing in return, yet who often can give us everything we need. In practicing hospitality, we welcome God into our midst.

From our earliest beginnings, we’ve learned that those who are hospitable often welcome God without even knowing it. Think back to Abraham. Strangers came to him and they turned out to be

angels. Think of Jacob, wrestling by the river Jabok, demanding a blessing from God, at God's most mysterious. Think of Mary and Joseph wandering the streets of Bethlehem, searching for a place to stay and discovering that there was no room, until one brave soul remembered the stable. Hospitality.

We like to think of ourselves as a friendly church. Every church does. We try to be hospitable. We celebrate the warmth of Green Hill. We try to live out God's welcome here. Some days we proclaim that whoever you are, wherever you are on your journey of faith, you are welcome here, as you are, to receive the grace of God so freely given. That's who we try to be. That's who we believe God calls us to be. Do we fall short? Of course we do. There are people who are not welcomed as they might be. We are only human. A number of years ago my sister visited a church where they had special mugs for visitors at coffee hour. They asked that any visitors take a special mug so that the members would know that here was a visitor and thus someone who should be welcomed. After the service, my sister used one of those special mugs, and nobody greeted her! We don't have special mugs here, but I continue to wonder about people whom I've missed, and times that I've been so busy getting on to the next thing, that I fail to extend that welcome that is a part of this place.

Duke Professor Joel Marcus writes: "A student came into my office at a time when I was busy writing. I reluctantly agreed to talk to him, trying not to let my impatience show. My fidgetiness increased when I noticed how long it was taking him to get to the point. Suddenly, however, something about the student got through to me. I realized that he bore an uncanny resemblance in appearance, manner and voice to one of the great leaders of our age. And it came to me in a flash—this guy could turn out to be the next _____! And here's the next _____ sitting in my office, and I can't even concentrate on what he is saying!

"Well, I don't know if that student will really turn out to be an incarnation of this person—but does it matter? 'Inasmuch as you have done it to one of the least of these, you have done it to me.'

"Menachem Schneerson, the famous Lubavitcher rabbi from Brooklyn, used to stand every week for hours as thousands of people filed by to receive his blessing or his advice about matters great and small. Once someone asked him how he, who was in his 80s, could stand for so long without seeming to get tired. The rabbi replied, "When you're counting diamonds you don't get tired."

"The abandoned baby on the street, the stranger at the door, even our own husband or wife or child, is a diamond, and in receiving and treasuring these diamonds we are receiving the 'pearl of great price' that was once hidden on earth as a destitute child of uncertain parentage."¹

Jesus today is not calling us to be meek and mild and gentle and naïve as a child. The child in his arms is an example of the last becoming first, the least becoming greatest. Jesus is calling us to recognize that when we are open to those who have the least standing, we have the opportunity of being surprised by Jesus. We get to count diamonds. When we are welcoming, Jesus springs up in our midst. In some ways it is as if Jesus were saying to us: "I don't want to leave anyone out of the kingdom and I don't want you to either. You are welcome, even when you miss the point, even when you are slow to understand, even when you get it wrong; remember, after all, I chose you in the first place. And, I want you to experience the incredible joy of practicing hospitality. I know it can be hard. Welcoming strangers most often will bring change. You'll see the world differently. Remember, in welcoming the least, the children, the disabled, the poor, and the poor in spirit, you welcome me." As disciples, we will continue to fail and we can also strive to learn from our past failures so that we might offer a more consistent welcome.

¹ Joel Marcus, Counting Diamonds: Mark 9:30-37 in *The Christian Century* Vol. 117, No. 24. August 30, 2000 © 2000.

Jesus continues to live in our midst. You can find him in the midst of those who otherwise might be invisible. “Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.”

Let us pray: Help us O God, to open our hearts, our churches, our lives: offering your welcome, where we might all no longer be strangers or guests, but like children at home. Through Jesus Christ our Lord we pray. Amen.