

# Welcoming the Child

Mark 9: 30-37

*25<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time/ 24<sup>th</sup> September 2006*

“But they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him.” It’s assuring to hear Mark recount the disciples’ confusion with and trepidation before the Lord. It’s comforting to know. We latter day disciples have much in common with them.

Yet, this verse, while reassuring is nevertheless an example that what Jesus teaches, what Jesus wants and expects from us his followers, is not easy. In fact, the vision of how we are to live and what the world is supposed to look like does not come easily to us. We can’t just pick it up in a moment. Jesus’ way is not instinctual. Jesus’ way is not natural. Jesus’ vision is not quickly evident. It’s different. It calls for an alternative way of seeing the world. His truth is at odds with the world as we know it and that stings. I think Flannery O’Connor (1925-1964) was on to something when she said the truth will make you odd. So then maybe it’s our reluctance at being different, of not being normal, of sticking out from everyone else that prevents us from hearing what Jesus is saying. It’s not surprising disciples become afraid.

Jesus’ message doesn’t sit well with them. They don’t get it. Jesus’ message of the kingdom of God is counter-intuitive, counter-cultural, it cuts against the grain of what they consider “normal.” How else can we hear a verse like this: “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.” Then add the invitation to take up our cross and follow this same Jesus. Then and now, one must confess it all sounds a bit bizarre.

But maybe it’s precisely our mistrust of the bizarre that hinders us most from embracing God’s good news. Yet this is what’s involved. In other words, when Jesus preaches and invites people to follow him, he is actually offering a *new script* by which they are to live their lives; he’s offering them a new story. So that following him means giving up one script, one way of living, and taking on a new one. When Jesus calls us to follow it’s an “invitation,” as biblical scholar Walter Brueggeman so aptly states it, “an invitation and summons to ‘switch stories,’ inviting people to give up, abandon, and renounce other stories that have shaped their lives in false or distorting ways,” so that the story of Jesus

might be embraced.<sup>1</sup> This is how lives are changed. This shift in story or the narrative that narrates our lives doesn't occur easily. As research has shown, people change only when they can envision an alternative, better way of living. We can't change until we've been given an alternative vision, a different way of living. That's what Jesus is trying to do for them – and ultimately for us. Jesus is offering a better way and he's inviting us to trust him. When we fail to trust him, when we can't quite catch that vision, don't understand that strange, new world Jesus invites us to – or when it scares us or makes us uneasy or we simply refuse to go there and prefer to stay where we are, even when we know in our heart of hearts that this way does not lead to life – we turn inward and away and focus on ourselves and rely on our known competencies, we become angry and resentful and jealous and envious.

Just like these disciples. It's as if they weren't even listening to Jesus. Instead, they argue over who is the greatest. Here we see disciples living by the world's script, not God's script, preferring to ask: What's in it for me? What's going to benefit me the most? Who is the best? Who is the greatest? Which is another way of saying, which is lower than me? Who is my inferior? Who is less than me? There's a place for healthy competition, for sure, but when it's at the expense of another, then competition turns violent, destructive, and sometimes deadly. It kills the soul. When the obsession for status, position, power, and authority consume us, someone always pays a price, producing within the culture what philosopher Alain de Botton aptly describes as "status anxiety."<sup>2</sup> We become anxious, fearful. (You might have seen the television show based on this book on PBS a few weeks ago.) There's something within human nature that resists God's script, that shares the disciples distrust of God's way, that wants to be King (or Queen) of the hill, to be best, the greatest. And even if we never really make it to the top (whatever our vision of the top might be) we at least take some comfort in knowing somewhere there are still a whole lot of people worse off at the bottom of that pile. Someone always pays a price. While we're reaching for the top, someone else is being buried at the bottom.

And at the bottom of the pile in Jesus' day was the child. In order for them to know a still more excellent way, Jesus turns their attention toward a child, places that child among them and says that the great one in God's kingdom is the one who becomes attentive to the bottom of the pile, the great one

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<sup>1</sup> Walter Brueggeman, *Biblical Perspectives on Evangelism: Living in a Three-Storyed Universe* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1993), 8, cited in A. Katherine Grieb, *The Story of Romans: A Narrative Defense of God's Righteousness* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), xxi-xxii.

<sup>2</sup> Alain de Botton, *Status Anxiety* (Pantheon, 2004).

serves the needs of the least, the great one is the servant. We know that children were at the bottom of the social, economic scale. They were the least, they were non-entities. One wasn't recognized as a person until adolescence. Our society's idealized approach toward children, our celebration of children, our cute church school renderings of Jesus with the children, actually hinder us from really seeing what Jesus is doing here and saying. This act of placing a child at the center of their world, as the object of their attention instead of their lust for greatness in the eyes of the world, to welcome a child who was the least as somehow welcoming God and a foretaste of what the kingdom is like, all of this would have been a shocking gesture, revolting to most people.<sup>3</sup>

What's so striking here is that Jesus doesn't just use this child as an object-lesson to demonstrate a kingdom ethic. He places the child among them and then he wraps his arms around the child – a rare, verb used here and again in 10:16, where Jesus rebukes the disciples who were trying to push the children away from him. He says bring them; let the children come, because if you can't welcome them then how can you welcome the kingdom of God? “And Jesus took them up into his arms, laid his hands on them, and blessed them.” The children were not symbols, but *persons* – real, live persons, flesh and blood.<sup>4</sup> The kingdom is all about the arms of God embracing the most vulnerable *persons*, the least and unimportant, the untouchable, the forgotten, and the invisible, saying to them, “You matter. Bless you.” In fact, Jesus is saying that God is going to take the folks on the bottom of the pile, those forced to the margins by society, and place them right at the very center of the kingdom, having a special place. “The last shall be first.” That's the justice of God. A shocking gesture, still, for some, revolting to others. But it's still the script of God – the way toward true life.

Which means this *gets* (!) to be the way of the church, for why else is the church given to us except to serve the kingdom? It's good to remember this, because children are still the most vulnerable in any society. I wonder if our idealization of children prevents us from seeing their real needs, or fail to see how children are still put at risk and exploited. The first casualties of any war or conflict are the children, on all sides. Think of all the displaced children during the Second World War or the innocent children who grew up in the “troubles” in Northern Ireland, the children in Iraq or Lebanon or Palestine or the Congo or abusive families in our neighborhoods who grow up in a world of so much

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<sup>3</sup> Ched Myers, *Binding the Strong Man: A Political Reading of Mark's Story of Jesus* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1994), 261.

<sup>4</sup> “The child is not a mere symbol in [the gospel of Mark], but a person.” Myers, 271.

violence, so much hurt, pain, and suffering with repercussions that ripple through history for generations. Except for the grace of God that breaks the cycle, psychologists, such as the Swiss analyst, Alice Miller, have shown us, “It is part of the tragic nature of the repetition compulsion that someone who hopes eventually to find a better world than the one he or she experienced as a child in fact keeps creating instead the same undesired state of affairs.”<sup>5</sup> We know that victimizers are often first victims themselves. So that when Jesus places a child at the center of his circle, a victim of his own society, in welcoming this child and making a safe space for him is a radical change, is the start of a new world, the threshold of something new, a turning of the age. The new world begins in such a small, yet significant act, “so shines a good deed in a weary world.”

I thought of our own child care center this week, as the children were out laughing in the playground. Think of all the children who have come through our doors for more than twenty-five years. We might not be actively creating peace in the Middle East, but we are contributing to God’s kingdom vision when we strive to create a safe place for the most vulnerable in our society. We are giving them opportunities to play and have fun, to feel secure, and cherished, and valued, working out the kingdom in small, yet significant ways. This is just one way we welcome the child.

But who else needs to be embraced and esteemed and told that they matter? That’s the question for us as a church and for us individually. The Kingdom of God means seeing those who are invisible to us. So who needs to be seen as a person? Who do you know at the bottom of the pile, the very least, who needs to be cherished and valued? Who needs to be placed first? Who is on the margins and needs to be put at the center, as Bonhoeffer (1906-1945) put it, of “our life together”? Who needs to be blessed? Cherished? Valued? Who needs to be seen?

We can start by welcoming the child, which then raises our consciousness for others. I wish you could have seen what I saw last Sunday during the benediction. You all were standing after the closing hymn. Little Raymond Sutton (about three and a half years old) was already half-way down the aisle, leaving his family behind. They were in the front pew for his sister Andie’s baptism. I lifted up my right hand to offer the blessing. But when Raymond

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<sup>5</sup> See Alice Miller, *For Your Own Good: Hidden Cruelty in Child-Rearing and the Roots of Violence* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1983), 241. All of Alice Miller’s writings attempt to address these critical concerns. Myers finds Miller’s analysis helpful in the exegesis of Mark 9 & 10 with regard to children. Myers, 264-271.

heard my voice he stopped in the aisle, turned around and lifted up his right arm and waved at me, offering me a kind of blessing. There he was at the center of the sanctuary with all the adults towering over him, most couldn't see him. But there he was at the center, offering the blessing. Just as it should be. Seeing allows for the welcome, and with the *seeing* comes the *blessing*. What a great image for us.

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