

Welcoming the Child

Mark 9:33-37 & Mark 10:13-16

Twenty-Third Sunday in Ordinary Time/9th September 200/Kick-Off Sunday

“Elliot comes to church prepared. He brings a bag with a few snacks – a small box of raisins and some crackers. He brings his most beloved action figures and usually takes them out about mid-way through the sermon, when the long minutes of hearing one person’s voice stops being interesting enough to hold his attention. And he brings his Bible, in his case a children’s story bible with bright pictures and engaging renditions of various narratives from the Old and New Testaments. On a recent Sunday morning in Elliot’s church, as members of the congregation settled into their pews to listen to the gospel reading for the day, Elliot already had his action figures out and moving on the pew beside him. As the pastor began to read the story from Mark 10 in which Jesus tells his disciples to let the children come to him, Elliot froze in his seat. Looking up at the pastor quickly, he grabbed his story bible and began frantically turning the pages, as he began to cry loudly, ‘I know that! I have that story! Look, I know that. It’s “Yes-Jesus-Loves-Me.”’ Elliot’s parents, rosy-faced with embarrassment over the attention of this ‘disruption,’ worked to quiet him. Elliot would not be quieted, however, until he found the page in his story bible with the picture of Jesus gathering children around him.”¹

Joyce Ann Mercer tells this story in her recently published book, *Welcoming Children: A Practical Theology of Childhood*. Associate professor of practical theology and Christian education at the Graduate Theological Union and San Francisco Theological Seminary (one of our Presbyterian seminaries), Mercer’s book is being claimed as one of “the finest theological texts on children written in the past fifty years” and likely to “remain unsurpassed for decades to come.”² My copy arrived on Thursday morning, so I haven’t had time to read it all, but I went to the chapter “Whoever Welcomes One Such Child” right away, which begins with the story of Elliot.

As soon as I read this story I immediately thought of the many children I have seen over the years coming to worship with their snacks, and their Bibles, but also with their favorite toys and books, like Harry Potter. And some of older youth, I know, come with their homework and sit up in the balcony (your pastors know what goes on up

¹ Joyce Ann Mercer, *Welcoming Children: A Practical Theology of Childhood*. Foreword by Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2005), 43-44.

² Richard Osmer’s review of the Mercer book in *Theology Today* (Vol. 64, No. 3/October 2007), 389-390.

there, we know what goes on up there). Some of our older folks who are “young in heart” might even come with your Blackberries and check email during the service. Since we have both Verizon and AT&T antennas in our steeple, reception is pretty good in the sanctuary.

All of this doesn't bother me and, I would argue, it really shouldn't bother us (although I'm not so sure about checking email during the sermon). Let's face it. We all have our distractions, no matter our age. Don't we? No one is paying attention every moment of the service. Believe me, *we know*. I can tell who is sleeping, with or without their eyes open. Sometimes I can tell when your mind is off wandering some place. We are not always focused. It actually takes a lot of focus just to pray the Lord's Prayer, being attentive to every petition and phrase, without our minds wandering off somewhere.

The distractions and diversions don't trouble me because I believe there's something about the creative Word of God, the amazing stories of the Bible, as Dorothy preaching about last week, the ever-compelling story of God's liberation and release that has a way to pierce through every competing claim for attention to be heard and embraced and lived with excitement and joy, “I know that! I *have* that story. Look, I know that, It's ‘Yes, Jesus-Love-Me.’” The Word of God has a power all its own and will be heard; it seeks us out whether you're paying attention or not (of course it helps if you're pay attention). What matters most is that we're here, gathered in this place, worshipping God, and hearing the life-giving Word, whether directly or indirectly, it doesn't really matter. What matters is that we're here.

When we gather, Sabbath after Sabbath over a lifetime, whether we get anything out of the service each week or not, over time we discover that we are slowly being shaped by the Order of Worship, the Order of Worship orders our life. Over time we are formed by the hymns and the prayers. Over time we are fashioned by Word and Sacrament. Over time here we are loved and cared for, we are corrected, challenged, called, and sent. Over time we see how the Spirit is moving in the church and weaving a thread of hope through our lives and creating us, forging us into the – the *laos* – people of God. Worship is a formative experience for people of any age whether we are getting something out of the service or not, the service is putting something – or Someone – into us. This means at some level we are never the same people leaving the sanctuary as when we entered the sanctuary. We have and are being changed, transformed. That's why it's important to be here, to be part of this community, to worship.

It's why Jesus is so adamant about welcoming the children, embracing them, affirming them, *not* because he hopes that one day they will grow up and follow him (that's not a concern in these texts), but because they *should* be included in the mission of the church because God is *already* at work in them. God cares about them, God loves them *already*.

This text, as you know, is no celebration of children as children, it's not a celebration of childhood. Jesus is isolating them out from the crowd because in the eyes of the crowd they had become invisible, possessing little value or worth within Roman culture. Children in the gospel accounts are sick, possessed, poor, and getting "in the way" of adults.³ Children are gifts; however, "children and childhood are gifts from God not because they are carefree, but because God has a purpose for children." As Joyce Mercer affirms, "God gives children to the church and to the world so that God may be known."⁴ This is a profound statement on the nature of children.

And Mercer takes this a little further. She writes, "God gives the gift of children so that the church will know how to live out its vocation as disciples. This clue from scripture, then, concerns children as agents, children as participants, and children as already expressive of the purposes of God. It constitutes a clue about the church's need to listen to its children and youth, to take them seriously as already being disciples who contribute to the mission and work of the body of Christ." She continues, "Children are not only in the church to be educated for future participation. They are already called to be part of its missional identity in [the] world."⁵ Children need to be here in the church and welcomed because they help us in knowing God; they help us become better disciples.

So how do we welcome the child? Children misbehave, get cranky, become moody, anxiety-prone or fearful, children drop clipboard and hymnals and make a racket, they can be quite vocal or verbal or cry, they get sick, children need to go to the bathroom, get hungry, prefer to play, want to go home, get bored, can be preoccupied and become disengaged, have short attention spans, would rather be reading Harry Potter, sometimes they can't grasp all that's going on, get confused – actually, if you think about it, they sound just like us! Maybe that's one way of welcoming the child, to see ourselves in them. We're like them in many ways, just a little older. I can think of adults who could fall under several of these categories. But it's all okay. What matters most is that we are here.

³ See Mercer's analysis of the role of children in First Century Galilee, 49ff.

⁴ Mercer, 66.

⁵ Mercer, 67.

How do we welcome the child? It's not a new question, but an old one. But the church in every age needs to approach the question and respond in new ways. The Christian Education and Worship Committees have been addressing these questions for most of the summer, as have the Session. We are making changes in worship, produced a new children's worship bulletin each week, we'll be offering classes on the meaning of worship, the sacraments, and the developing faith life of children. It's a concern for the whole church. How can we make our children feel more welcomed, included, embraced, and loved? We *all* signed on to this at their baptisms. It's also significant to note that in Jesus' world, men did not embrace children in public. Only women did that.⁶ But Jesus throws that convention out the window to make a point. He embraces the child and welcomes the least of these into the kingdom. Every child has a place here and deserves to be here. And we need them here, as Jesus showed us, because their ability to be disciples informs the way we all seek to be disciples of Christ.

Let us remember that God is *already* at work in their lives. Maybe a challenge for us entering into this new program year welcoming the children would be for us to be more open to what they have to show us and teach us about Jesus, receptive to their love and grace, putting ourselves imaginatively into their world and seeing the world and ourselves from their perspective and embracing it, like Jesus did. We just might get a glimpse the kingdom of God.

Rev. Dr. Kenneth E. Kovacs

*Catonsville Presbyterian Church
Catonsville, Maryland*

⁶ Mercer, 50-52.