



The Way of the Child

A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Sean Lanigan

Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost~September 23, 2018

Wisdom 1:16-2:1, 12-22

The ungodly by their words and deeds summoned death; considering him a friend, they pined away and made a covenant with him, because they are fit to belong to his company. For they reasoned unsoundly, saying to themselves, "Short and sorrowful is our life, and there is no remedy when a life comes to its end, and no one has been known to return from Hades. Let us lie in wait for the righteous man, because he is inconvenient to us and opposes our actions; he reproaches us for sins against the law, and accuses us of sins against our training. He professes to have knowledge of God, and calls himself a child of the Lord. He became to us a reproof of our thoughts; the very sight of him is a burden to us, because his manner of life is unlike that of others, and his ways are strange. We are considered by him as something base, and he avoids our ways as unclean; he calls the last end of the righteous happy, and boasts that God is his father. Let us see if his words are true, and let us test what will happen at the end of his life; for if the righteous man is God's child, he will help him, and will deliver him from the hand of his adversaries. Let us test him with insult and torture, so that we may find out how gentle he is, and make trial of his forbearance. Let us condemn him to a shameful death, for, according to what he says, he will be protected." Thus they reasoned, but they were led astray, for their wickedness blinded them, and they did not know the secret purposes of God, nor hoped for the wages of holiness, nor discerned the prize for blameless souls.

Psalm 54-8

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| 1 | Save me, O God, by your Name; *
in your might, defend my cause. | it is God who sustains my life. | |
| 2 | Hear my prayer, O God; *
give ear to the words of my mouth. | 5 | Render evil to those who spy on me; *
in your faithfulness, destroy them. |
| 3 | For the arrogant have risen up against me,
and the ruthless have sought my life, *
those who have no regard for God. | 6 | I will offer you a freewill sacrifice *
and praise your Name, O God, for it is good. |
| 4 | Behold, God is my helper; * | 7 | For you have rescued me from every trouble, *
and my eye has seen the ruin of my foes. |

James 3:13-4:3, 7-8a

Who is wise and understanding among you? Show by your good life that your works are done with gentleness born of wisdom. But if you have bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not be boastful and false to the truth. Such wisdom does not come down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, devilish. For where there is envy and selfish ambition, there will also be disorder and wickedness of every kind. But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy. And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace for those who make peace. Those conflicts and disputes among you, where do they come from? Do they not come from your cravings that are at war within you? You want something and do not have it; so you commit murder. And you covet something and cannot obtain it; so you engage in disputes and conflicts. You do not have, because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, in order to spend what you get on your pleasures. Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you.

Mark 9:30-37

Jesus and the disciples passed through Galilee. He did not want anyone to know it; for he was teaching his disciples, saying to them, "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." But they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him. Then they came to Capernaum; and when he was in the house he asked them, "What were you arguing about on the way?" But they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another who was the greatest. He sat down,

called the twelve, and said to them, "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all." Then he took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms, he said to them, "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me."

As you may know, I haven't been feeling so great these past couple of weeks. I've been recovering from wrist reconstruction, and to my surprise, the pain really hasn't been the worst part of it. Rather, it's been my need for endless help, my inability to do much for myself, that has felt like the most difficult aspect of this recovery.

Now while it might sound great to some of you to be waited on hand and foot for a couple of weeks, it's actually quite agonizing and infuriating. It feels infantilizing, almost degrading—to need help with the shower and the bathroom, with eating and drinking, with ice packs and pillows—lying in bed much of the day to keep my arm elevated and the swelling down.

I thought I was going to have a bit of an unplanned vacation, but I soon discovered that when you can do very little for yourself, you're left with an awful lot of time to fill, and that very few of my usual distractions and tricks seem to work. I couldn't even hold a book for the first week after surgery and had to resort to Netflix.

Like a child, I needed help with almost everything.

So when I read again this week Jesus' admonition to the disciples, that they should welcome the children, I felt a strong inner recoil...having just re-experienced a taste of the frustrating dependency of childhood.

You see, I think when we hear Jesus speak of children, we tend mostly to think about children's openness and innocence and receptivity—the charming parts of childhood. We don't, however, like to think much about how utterly powerless children really are. About how almost completely lacking in autonomy childhood tends to be. When reminded of the perils of childhood, then, Jesus' teaching that by welcoming a child we welcome him suddenly feels less cute, and more complex.

Indeed: welcoming children **means** welcoming powerlessness, dependency, need. None of which is very appealing to most of us. Childhood can be a far more terrifying thing than many of us give it credit for.

Which means that the greatness the disciples were debating can feel all the more worth striving for—achieving autonomy and independence, not needing anything from anyone, creating a life as distant from the insults of childhood as can be.

I read recently, with great interest, about the fact that throughout history, there has often been a delay between a child's birth and that child being conceived of as a full person.

Anthropologically speaking, [and I quote]:

“Only a tiny fraction of the world's societies have accorded an unconditional welcome to every new member (Meskell 1994: 39). In societies where well-formed, full-term newborns may not survive to become helpful and able to pay back the investment made in them, the actuarial odds dictate a very careful evaluation of the newborn. Is it completely whole? Does it behave normally, crying neither too little nor too much? Is it a girl when a boy is infinitely preferred? Did it arrive “too soon” before its older and, hence more valuable sibling had been weaned?”¹

And on, and on the questions go.

Throughout history, infant mortality has often been high, with cross-cultural data indicating that one-fifth to one-half of children typically did not make it to age 5. Which meant that societies developed all sorts of ways to cope, ways to avoid getting too attached to a child too soon.

So very different from our way of doing things. All of which, therefore, makes Jesus' welcoming and valuing of children even more remarkable.

Because to welcome the child is not just to welcome dependency, but also uncertainty. To welcome the child is to embrace contingency, the true fragility of human existence. Even more than for us, I would imagine, for an ancient person to welcome the presence of children would have been a radical exercise in trust and hope—the antithesis of exercising greatness. An investment in something, in someone, who had not yet made it, who might never make it.

In this way, then, the practice of welcoming the presence of children has a lot in common with the whole project of following Jesus. The self-same Jesus who was trying to tell his disciples that he was going to be betrayed, killed, and three days after being killed, would rise again. Risky business. Too risky to acknowledge or even try to

¹ https://digitalcommons.usu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1436&context=sswa_facpubs

understand, at least for Mark's disciples. And maybe also for us. Which means that the search for greatness continues, on and on, unrelenting. But there is another way. Another way.

Like the disciples, however, we may have a lot of questions—questions that we might not know how to ask, or even acknowledge. About why the way of Jesus so fundamentally opposes our search for greatness, because we might still be surprised by this simple truth, after all these years. Surprised that Christianity is such a radical path.

Partly, because most of us inherited this journey: from our parents and grandparents, As children. Most of us didn't find or choose it on our own, Although we may have embraced it more actively and independently at some point. Nevertheless, especially for those of us who have inherited it, Christianity has probably seemed to be mostly about being good, rather than becoming new.

Becoming people who can welcome a child in all of his or her dependency and need and snot and whining and cuddles and giggles. The full catastrophe of new life.

I invite you to imagine with me, then, What it might be like to engage in the precise action that Jesus commends to his followers in today's gospel passage.

“Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me.”

I wonder: what would it look like to welcome the child, here at St. Peters?

Well first off, we'd have to acknowledge that most of the children among us are sitting in the choir stalls, leading us in worship.

So they might seem a little remote to you, dressed in their matching robes, processing in-and-out in precise formation, better singers than most of us could ever hope to be.

I admit to being a little intimidated by them when I first got here. I rarely spoke to the children, as they seemed perfectly satisfied by their own peer interactions. So self-possessed, mature, and independent. They didn't seem to need anything from me. So I tended to leave them alone. A secret society whose password was inscrutable to me.

And the truth is, the children of the choir might very well not need me. But still, I need them. I need them. Because I am called to welcome them, to include them, no matter how comfortable they may already seem to be. Jesus' invitation to welcome the children, is an invitation to get curious about their lives, about who they are as people, and to include them fully, in all their messy glory. To understand what it's like to grow up with smartphones and social media and enormous pressures to succeed...in a world growing crazier by the day. To know their names. To know something of their hopes and dreams, their fears and sorrows. To seek and hear their voices and ideas. For they are members of this church, too.

To be a Christian IS to, always and everywhere, welcome the children. And to welcome the children is to invest in, care about, and nurture all children—not just the ones we happen to be related to...even when they're a little rambunctious or inconvenient or inscrutable. Jesus knew that we disregard children at our own peril. At the expense of disregarding our own fragility and dependency...and that of others. And thereby disconnecting from something vitally important about our own humanity.

You see, relating to children can remind us that there's more to life than the quest for greatness. And in such a time as this, I think we need that reminder more than anything. For we can hardly hear the fullness of the gospel, until we can remember that: Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again.

Because this isn't just a statement about Jesus. It is a statement about the deepest nature of reality. About the pattern of death and resurrection that is at the very heart of the Christian story. Our story, as much as Jesus'.

Dying he destroyed our death, rising he restored our life.

Once and for all, but also again and again. We participate in the Paschal Mystery. We die and we rise. We do not have to be afraid. We do not have to be great. For nothing can or will stop us from dying. But Christ can and will raise us from the depths of the grave. Not just on the last day. But today. Tomorrow. Forever. He is Alpha and Omega. So that we do not have to be.

So come as children. Or do not come at all. There isn't much room for greatness on this journey. It's a journey to freedom, so we're traveling light.

Won't you come along? Amen.