

Welcoming Children
Mark 9:30-37
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Pentecost +18B
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I was fortunate to spend a few hours last week with Dr. Jonathan Walton, Harvard Professor and Minister in the Memorial Church of Harvard University. On that first night in Cambridge, he asked a group of 40 pastors to sit for only a couple of minutes and select the four verses of scripture that frame one's life and ministry. He drew a box on a dry erase board, adding other notes to consider in the conversation, but the first task was to select four verses.

What would you choose? I'm still thinking on this and revising mine. I can get to six, maybe, or three with a perpetually rotating 4th. In our second week of work together, I've already asked our Governance Restructuring Team to consider this exercise in thinking about our congregation. And when I lead a baptism class this afternoon, we'll return to the practice of guiding scripture that frames a life. So simple a task, I'm drawn to the beauty and the significance of clarifying the theological framework that guides us as a people, that guides me as a pastor, that frame the life of a Christ follower.

What four verses (or we can even generously say passages of scripture) draw the framework of the worshipping community at St. Charles Ave. Baptist Church? I am confident one of the four is Matthew 25.31-46: "I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me... Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me."

In Mark's gospel, Jesus is using the very same language to talk about children. I wanted to make this text fit what Matthew 18.2-4 says in a similar scenario, "He called a child, whom he put among them, and said, 'Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.'"

But that isn't what Jesus says here in Mark 9.

In Mark's telling, "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.'"

In Matthew's gospel, the disciples boldly walk up to Jesus and ask him directly, "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" And Jesus responds by telling them they must become like children.

In Mark's gospel, the disciples are bickering and squabbling between themselves about who is greatest, and Jesus hears them when they think he doesn't. They've already been confused by his teaching about his necessary death, but they didn't want to let him know that they didn't understand. And now they are arguing about who is doing the best, mastering the Jesus class, and who is the greatest. They are silent. They don't want him to know when they don't understand him. They don't want him to know when they've been arguing. They don't want him to know they're jockeying for his favor and unique blessing. They don't want to appear foolish or vulnerable in front of him.

Then Jesus draws their attention to a child. Now, here's a moment when it's easy to be anachronistic and apply what we know and experience about children today in 21st century Western culture to the children in the 1st century Palestinian gospels. It is important for us to recognize children weren't central in the life of the community. If learning and debate was the realm of men, if women needed a man to safely navigate the world, then it follows that children certainly weren't being held up and delighted in, particularly in the midst of men's work.

That's when Jesus loves to step in and prove a point—when grown folks think they've figured out life, and power and what matters. He tells them, "Your ego is leading the conversation, disciples, and you're missing out on the framework of my teaching. How you welcome the vulnerable is how you welcome me. How you welcome the least among you is how you engage the Divine. This way is never about being greatest. This way is always about holy welcome."

Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me. Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.

These words are framework words. These gospel lessons on holy welcome are absolutely one of the four sides of our life together here, framing what we do, how we gather, how we love, how we welcome, how we serve, how we give of ourselves and our time and our resources in this world.

Today is a day when I am spending a lot of time with some of our children, and my hope is that we will laugh a lot, listen to each other's stories, and do some of this very same work in building out our scripture frames together. Just as our Matthew 25 work draws us into community with incarcerated and formerly incarcerated neighbors, newcomers, refugees, and undocumented neighbors, friends in need of adequate food and clean water, the addition of this Mark 9 welcome draws us into community with all kinds of children.

How do we engage children to learn from them? It's tempting as a very intelligent, mostly adult congregation to think that the real work of the church is happening on an adult level. It's also a temptation to feel that children are noisy, and run too much, and get in the way of the very sober, dignified work we grown-ups are about. Jesus invites a child from the edge of the circle into the middle and says, "This is where your work is. How are you welcoming this child? What can this child teach you?"

How do we support children to help them grow? This is faith formation question, sure. We as a congregation need to be focused on the shared responsibility of helping to shape the faith of our youngest community members. But this question is also about children in our neighborhood. We provide some food to neighboring students whose families don't have adequate resources for full, healthy meals over the weekend and through the summer months. How do we meet some basic needs for children to grow? How do we advocate for children? We do a really great job of talking about and engaging the needs of vulnerable adults in our city and nation and globe. Is it a growing edge for us to apply the same awareness and care to children? Welcome children with a holy welcome is like any other human welcome

—learning names, growing in relationship, seeing areas of need, becoming allies and advocates.

In our children's message, we climbed into a fort like the ones my grandfather would make in my grandparents' living room. I do wonder what it will take for us to play with ease here? To laugh and delight effortlessly? To let our guard down and readily admit when we don't know something. To admit when our ego has gotten the best of us again instead of growing silent with shame. Jesus in Matthew 18 calls his disciples to become like a child.

As I thought about putting together this fort today, I also thought about the difference between playing in a blanket fort and living in a fragile tent. Tens of thousands of migrant children who live in tents without home, without support, without adequate care, without consistent advocates making a path out of those tents. How many children are still detained and separated from parents and loving, nurturing, safe adults at the United States border? Jesus says, "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me."

Holy Welcome is our work. As we draw our frame, marking the guiding scripture that shapes us, it isn't enough to simply acknowledge a guiding verse or passage of text and mentally, intellectually affirm it. No, Jesus is not being metaphorical here. He is telling the disciples he is going to literally give his flesh to the things he is teaching. He believes in the expansive love of God so much that he is willing to die for this message, is going to die for it, is going to fight the systems that feed the ego and ignore the least of these until his very last breath and beyond the grave.

We are called to this work.

We are called to this Way.

We are called to this welcome.

Amen.