

“One of These Children” a sermon by The Rev. Keenan Kelsey
Noe Valley Ministry, a progressive Presbyterian Church September 20, 2009

TEXT: Mark 9:30-37 They went on from there and 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 about 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.’

REMEMBER LAST WEEK (Mark 8:27-38) when the disciples of Jesus first heard his prediction of suffering and death? They refused to believe. They retreated to the hope of a conquering Messiah, and Jesus rebuked them. “You must lose your life to gain it. You must deny self and take up the cross.” Do you suppose these earnest but befuddled disciples understood these words any better than we did?

Last week’s reading sets the stage for the scene today. Once again Jesus shares news of his betrayal and death. Once again the disciples don’t understand, and this time, they are afraid to ask. Instead, they begin arguing among themselves about who is the greatest. Perhaps they were fighting about who would be the leader after Jesus was gone from them and how they would survive as a group. Perhaps, in their fear, they each suddenly wanted to be Jesus’ best friend, the greatest and most valuable disciple. Perhaps they simply wanted a distraction from hard, unimaginable truth.

Once again, Jesus takes this teachable moment and turns their notions of greatness upside down by asserting that the first will be last and a servant of all. Then he hugs a child.

This is shocking! It may not seem shocking to those of us who grew up with pictures of Jesus with children seated all around him, or holding a child on his lap. We sang, “Jesus loves me” and never doubted our importance in Jesus’ eyes.

But the first century world held no such romantic view. Thomas Aquinas taught that in a raging fire a husband was obliged to save his father first, then his mother, next his wife, and last of all his young child. Children were among a long list of “the invisible” - people who really didn’t count in Jesus’ day. The very word “child” was also translated as slave. Children did not have value. Perhaps it is no accident that children play a prominent place in the gospels as metaphors for kingdom or community living. The child who really didn’t count represents the many who don’t “count” then, or today: the old, handicapped, sick, illiterate, poverty stricken.... children were those without voice. Certainly Jesus tells his first disciples - and us today, these are the folks to whom you should be reaching out, those with no voice, the most vulnerable.

Perhaps Jesus also meant the child within. Often our inner child is full of abandon and playfulness. But isn't inner child also sometimes insecure and frightened? Isn't it our call to be even better at demonstrating the love of God and the invitation of God to those fearful children who are inside ourselves and others?

Still, I think there's something else in this metaphor of children. To become as a child in the way of Jesus is akin to relinquishment of power and place in favor of a raw vulnerability, even unto suffering and death.

The gnostic Gospel of Thomas gives a curious twist to these children's texts. When asked what his students are like, Jesus replies that they are like children who live in a field that doesn't belong to them. The owners appear and demand "Give us back our field." But the children have no sense of what ownership means, and nothing to defend. Instead they strip themselves and stand before the owners naked, demonstrating that they truly are without possessions.

Doesn't that sound like St. Francis of Assisi, who was publically chastised by his father for selling his father's possessions and giving the money to the poor? In the middle of the square, Francis took off all his clothes and laid them at the feet of his father. Then he addressed the crowd "From now on I can walk naked before Holy God, no longer saying my father Pietro Bernardone, but my father who art in heaven."

I wonder if welcoming the child isn't about being naked before God. All these stories posit a way of being that leaves nothing between the follower and God. In the image of the child there is dispossession that opens us to what is most present, most real in the moment. There is something in the mere presence of a child that conveys the essential more wondrously than all our adult words, understandings, or efforts to give shape and meaning to life.

There is something in welcoming the child that also loosens our tight grip on things, on power and even on those treasures of life love and faith we hold dear. Jesus dropped everything to hold a child in his lap, and so must we. To make the image of welcoming the child operative in our lives, to give permission to scoop a little one into our arms as Jesus did, requires letting go of whatever we are holding on to at the moment. Welcoming and releasing are sisters. They work together, nourishing and supporting one another.

We all end this life naked in a field. I think that in inviting the disciples to reckon with his approaching passion Jesus was asking them to trust beyond what they could know and grasp, beyond what they could hold in a place with human will and effort. The possibility that he extended to them was to do the stripping now, to do the unclenching now, so God's presence could be lived without being fully revealed and understood. In the midst of the dark, heavy burden of his pending passion, in the midst of the bickering of disciples over position and power, he invited the disciples to trust, to open their arms and hearts, to move into the unknown.

The childlike path is not easy. It continually undermines societal pressures for status, success, superior knowledge, idealized images of how we should be. According to Jesus, these goals are not prerequisites for a creative and compassionate life--whereas relational trust and a receptive spirit are. This seems folly in the eyes of the modern world, but an enduring spiritual trust so well expressed by the writer of Psalm 131:

Oh God, my heart is not lifted up
My eyes are not raised too high.
I do not occupy myself with things
 too great and too marvelous for me.
But I have calmed and quieted my soul
Like a weaned child with its mother.
My soul is like the weaned child that is with me.

Similarly, the 20th century poet TS Eliot suggested that before the mystery of God and life nothing else was required but a continually surrendered state of heart and mind.

He wrote:
You are not here to verify, instruct yourself,
or inform curiosity or carry report.
You are here to kneel.

May it be so.