

Pastor Jon's Sermon from Sunday, August 22, 2024. Based on Mark 9:30-37. "Jesus Teaches a Children's Sermon"

Our Gospel today about Jesus taking a child in his arms reminds me of children's sermons. Let the children come forward in all their glory. Let kids run in church. And kids say the darndest things. They are full of wisdom and truth. Out of the mouths of babes and infants. I asked the kids once on internship what they wanted to be when they grew up. One little boy said a Pastor. I was like wow, cool. Why is that? Because you only work one day a week.

Jesus often used object lessons and parables to teach his followers, antagonists, and crowds about his in-breaking kingdom.

In our Gospel for today, Jesus teaches the disciples what true greatness looks like by putting a child in his arms. As they passed through Galilee on foot, they were arguing about who was the greatest. They were having their own Muhamed Ali Moments. "I am the greatest." No, I am the greatest. Jesus knew, but he asks, what were you arguing about on the way, they went silent, perhaps like a child about to get in trouble.

So, in the text, Jesus sits down. And when your rabbi sits down, this means he or she is going to go into a mode of teaching. So Jesus taught:

"Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all." Greatness in Jesus kingdom isn't about power, or prestige, or being first, but about being a servant of all. This is a reversal of how greatness is understood. We like to be first and best. And oftentimes our identity is tied to our successes or failures. However, greatness for Jesus followers is when we serve all. And "all" is an important word here. To illustrate "all", Jesus took a little child, placed it among them, and put it in his arms and said, "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name, welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me."

To welcome means to offer hospitality to a child. To receive, accept, take, or bear with in Greek.

You see, Children were the most vulnerable members of society, and they weren't lifted up as much as they are today in families. Children had little status within the community. A minor child was typically treated no greater than a slave until they reached maturity or could work for the family. To pick up a child and suggest full hospitality and welcome for them was a great reversal of the pecking order of who was first to be served. Children always suffered first from famine, war, disease, and dislocation. The orphan was the stereotype of the weakest most vulnerable member of society.

According to the Social Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels, Infant mortality rates sometimes reached 30%. Another 30% of live births were dead by age six, and 60 percent were gone by age 16. If a child made it to adulthood, it was cause for celebration.

So, when we as the church or individual Christians welcome the most vulnerable in society, we welcome Jesus himself. And not only Jesus, but God the Father and the Holy Spirit.

How we receive children in church really says a lot about how we welcome all people. I remember in seminary when my daughter Annika was young. I brought her to worship in the seminary chapel. She was singing in her own glorious way to the liturgy during the supposed quiet times and pointing to the cross saying dedus. Was it distracting others I wondered? Craig Nesson, one of my professors and mentors leaned over to me and whispered in my ear, "In God's Kingdom, we would be rejoicing like Annika."

Finally, I want you to now imagine you are that child in Jesus arms right now? He is receiving you fully. He is taking the most vulnerable parts of your life and accepting you. We are all children of God in need of God's help. Imagine how that child felt? Loved, accepted, lifted up, validated. How do you feel in Jesus arms?

That is who our God is. Gracious, loving, and accepting. We receive God's embrace today in the Word and in Holy Communion. We are then called to go out and share that same love and grace for our neighbors. And when we serve others, Jesus says you will be great. Amen