

Mark 9:30-37

³⁰ From there Jesus and his followers went through Galilee, but he didn't want anyone to know it. ³¹ This was because he was teaching his disciples, "The Human One^[a] will be delivered into human hands. They will kill him. Three days after he is killed he will rise up." ³² But they didn't understand this kind of talk, and they were afraid to ask him.

³³ They entered Capernaum. When they had come into a house, he asked them, "What were you arguing about during the journey?" ³⁴ They didn't respond, since on the way they had been debating with each other about who was the greatest. ³⁵ He sat down, called the Twelve, and said to them, "Whoever wants to be first must be least of all and the servant of all." ³⁶ Jesus reached for a little child, placed him among the Twelve, and embraced him. Then he said, ³⁷ "Whoever welcomes one of these children in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me isn't actually welcoming me but rather the one who sent me."

Welcoming the Vulnerable

Mark 9:30-37

Why did Jesus place a child in the midst of his disciples? On other occasions, when Jesus wanted to teach something, he told a parable, or held up a coin, or pointed to the birds of the air and the lilies of the fields. But this time, he took a child, and little child, and held them in his arms. Why a child?

We love children, don't we? Last week at the most silent moment we heard the cry of a child and I heard an audible, "I love that sound" from the front row. Spend a little time with Wakely and Wyatt and you will be moved to great smiles at their curiosity and joy.

But in Jesus' day, children were not considered Gerber babies, lovely, sweet, and cuddly. Children were worth far less to society than adults. Bruce J. Malina and Richard L. Rohrbaugh put it bluntly in *Social Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels*:

"Childhood in antiquity was a time of terror. Infant mortality rates sometimes reached 30%. Another 30% of live births were dead by the time they reached 8 years old (Veronica's age),

and 60% were dead by age 17 (Daisy's age). Children always suffered first from famine, war, disease, and dislocation...Children had little status within the community of family. A minor child was on par with a slave, and only after reaching maturity were they a free person who could inherit the family estate. The term 'child/children' could be used as a serious insult."

Jesus was making a radical statement, easy to understand but not so easy to follow, like loving your neighbor.

Will Willimon, the chaplain at Duke University, said, "This now gets us close to the heart of Jesus' action. When Jesus placed a child in their midst, even held the child in his arms, it was not that the child was cuddly, lovable creature in need of kindness. Rather, it was precisely that the child was unlovable, undesirable, socially unfit."

Have you ever been around a kid who you just wanted to shake? Those kids who are self-centered, demanding, unthankful, little brats? The "me, me, me" kids? The "me first, me first" kids? The "I'll do it MY WAY" kids? I saw a kid pitch a royal fit in the grocery store checkout line. I mean, rolling on the floor, kicking and screaming type of fit because they couldn't get a piece of candy.

The grocery basket was filled with good stuff: ice cream; cookies; ding-dongs; but the kid wanted a candy bar and mom said, "No!" And that set the kid off. I wanted to hear the mom use the good Kentucky phrase, "I'll knock your head into tomorrow." Of course, I am not a proponent for violence but I wanted to snatch up that kid and teach them a thing or two.

"Then Jesus took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms..." he shook that kid...no, no, no. "And taking the child lovingly, tangibly, affectionately in his arms, he said to them, 'Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me...Welcomes me.'" Sounds a lot like, "Christ Welcomes All" to me.

Indeed, when Jesus took a child and placed him in the midst of the disciples, he was placing there just about the lowest form of life on earth. Children were weak and replaceable, powerless and worth very little to the society. In fact, it seems that they were important to no one, to no one except Jesus. Jesus not only placed the child in the middle of his company of disciples, in the midst of his own chosen community. He took the child tenderly in his arms.

So, why a child?

In Jesus' day, the child was the unlovable. Have you ever been told you are "unlovable"? In Jesus' day, the child was undesirable. Have you ever been told you are undesirable? In Jesus' day, the child was socially unfit. Have you ever been told you are "socially unfit"? Well, so by choosing a child, Jesus is saying, "You are my beloved. You are welcome."

Why a child? What Jesus was teaching is not just kindness, but kindness directed toward those who never experience the kindness of the world; not just tenderness, but tenderness towards those who never feel a loving touch; not just hospitality, but a wide welcome toward those for whom all other doors have been slammed shut.

So who does Christ welcome? Christ welcomes ALL! The alcoholic, the immigrant, the blind, the lame, the widow, the orphan, the vagrant, the asylum seeker, the sex worker, the sex offender, the undocumented, the Latino, the loud-spoiled brat, the mentally challenged, the physically challenged, those all over the spectrum are welcomed. (You get the idea?) All are welcome.

Even those whom we describe as "the other" are welcomed. The vaccinated and the non-vaccinated, the vegetarian and the vegan, the farmers and the urbanites, the Republicans and the Democrats,

those pro-life and those pro-choice, those who have tattoos and those with piercings are all welcomed. The hes, the shes, the thems and the zs are welcomed. The 1%ers and the destitute. Do you hear who "ALL" includes? The LGBTQIA+ community, the felon, the bigot, the stranger, the "other". All are welcome- all who society has harmed with vicious words, actions, laws which denigrate and oppress them and all their oppressors.

And there is more! Jesus said, "Whoever welcomes one of these children in my name, one of these vulnerable, one of these 'others', welcomes me; you get that? Welcome a child and you are welcoming Jesus himself. And there is even more! "Whoever welcomes me isn't actually welcoming me but rather the One who sent me." Ultimately welcoming a vulnerable, worthless, pain-in-the-neck child, an outcast, is welcoming God into our lives!!! What a joy! What a blessing!

Thanks be to God. Amen.

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First Presbyterian Church, Bowling Green, OH
Proper 20, Year B
September 19, 2021