

“A Child of God”

I would like to start with a thought experiment. Remember when you were a child. What was the one thing you wanted more than anything else? Before you answer let me be more specific. I do not mean whether you wanted to be a police officer, teacher, soldier, mom, or other specific profession. Rather what was it that every child wanted? This was the one thing you wanted no matter how old you were. Any ideas? Here is a clue, you only stopped wanting this when you reached age 21. Does that help? Of course, the one thing that every child wants is to be a grownup. It is because children perceive that once they are grownups, they have more agency. They think there will be fewer restrictions. They think they can do whatever they want because parents, teachers, and other grownups will not be telling them what to do.

Here is another question. How many of you would like to go back to childhood even if just for one day? What would draw you back to childhood? Perhaps, it would be for the simplicity of childhood. It could be to live carefree without adult responsibilities. We might want to relive something special or be with those we loved who have since died.

Childhood is a special time of play, exploration, learning and growth. However, much of the special aspects of childhood have come in the last 75 to 100 years in the west. Diseases often took the lives of young children before vaccines and antibiotics. Also, while there was some time for play, many families relied on the labor of children. They helped with household chores, agricultural duties, and in the fields. In cities children worked in factories because their small hands and nimble fingers were better at working with machinery than larger hands of adults. Also, just to survive families needed the meager wages children brought in. These situations continue today in the developing world.

Childhood is not always rosy or carefree, but there was something special about children that Jesus recognized and expected his disciples to recognize when he challenged them by using a child as a metaphor.

Today’s reading from the Gospel of Mark comes not long after last week’s reading when Jesus reveals, to the disciples’ consternation, how his ministry will end violently. In between last week’s and this week’s readings, he took Peter, James, and John up a mountain with him where to their amazement he was transfigured. Jesus then heals a boy with an evil spirit; a healing that the disciples could not perform. This is followed by Jesus foretelling again his death and resurrection.

After these powerful scenes, today we hear the disciples arguing among themselves which one of them is the greatest. What exactly do these guys have to be proud of? What great feats have they accomplished? Nothing according to Mark’s report. Instead of being humbled by the miracles of Jesus and his second foretelling of his death, they get caught up in ego and pride. Jesus told Peter earlier, “You are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.” It is as though they did not hear him. This could be the reason that one of my seminary professors referred to Jesus’ followers in Mark as the “duh”-sciples.

Who is the greatest is an earthly thing. It is what adults strive for in work, play, church, volunteer work, and politics. In the work world we cannot seem to help being fascinated by the Forbes list of the wealthiest as if that is a sign of great achievement. We hear about greatness in sports all of the time. Who is the GOAT, the greatest of all time. We have arguments about it as though it matters. In church who has the

preeminent positions in the leadership. Volunteers want pins and certificates and other accolades. In world affairs the need to dominate leads to wars, massacres, assassinations, espionage, and mayhem. There is no good in it. Those who strive for greatness and priority, who need to be the GOAT have focused on earthly things and not divine things.

The little child that Jesus places amidst the disciples is his example of one without status. Commentator Dan Clendenin wrote regarding children in this gospel that, “society dismisses [children] as perhaps cute but ultimately insignificant, someone who lacks any accomplishments, greatness, status, or pretensions.”¹ Children do not have great incomes, advanced degrees, prestigious titles, political power, military rank, or C-suite positions. Engaging with a child does not confer any status in the way that hobnobbing with the leaders of society can. You might post on Facebook a selfie with a celebrity, but only doting parents and grandparents post photos with children.

Additionally, children call us into simplicity. Only the most egotistical person tries to impress a child with adult accomplishments and glory. Children do not value it, and they are not interested in it. A child wants you to engage with her where she is. Read to her, have an imaginary tea party with her, lift her up into a tree, or teach her to ride a bike. Get down on your knees and enter her world that is what we are called to do.

Jesus is trying to communicate to us that it is the child’s simplicity and lack of worldly status that we need to emulate. Welcoming an insignificant child is tantamount to welcoming Jesus. Welcoming Jesus is the same as welcoming God the Father. Adult striving for accomplishments and greatness is an impediment to finding the awareness to welcome God. God is not interested in earthly accomplishments. In God’s eyes CEOs are no more important than ditch diggers, presidents are no more worthy than factory workers, and bishops and priests are no more valuable than the person who cleans the church restrooms. Striving is for naught in God’s kingdom.

We are at our best when we are on our knees with a child or in humble adoration of God. Imagine sitting on the lap of God and being embraced in God’s expansive love. That is what it is like to be a child of God. A child who knows no fear, striving, or worry. It is ours if we are willing to leave behind our earthly motivations to receive the blessing of blessings which is beyond all human striving and all understanding.

¹ Dan Clendenin, “Suffer the Children” accessed September 21, 2024, <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/essays/3753-suffer-the-children>