

Sermon: Welcome the Child

New North Church, Hingham

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Based on **Mark 9:30-37**

Mark's Gospel fascinates me. It opens with these words: 'The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.'

Mark hits the ground running, tells his story quickly, and leaves us with a cliff-hanger ending. He meant for us to read his Gospel all at once, out loud, or, better yet, to listen as someone else reads it to us. It only takes an hour or so.

Every passage in Scripture is significant, but the lectionary often hides context. For example, today's Gospel reading leaves us with an image of a gentle Jesus who loves little children. That may be accurate, as far as it goes. But.

If we pick up where we left off last week, when Jesus began to teach the disciples that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, be rejected, killed, and after three days rise again, and then further taught them that those who want to save their life will lose it, the image of a gentle Jesus falls away.

In between last week's reading and today's passage are the stories of the Transfiguration and the healing of a presumably epileptic boy. In that scene, Jesus' frustrations with his disciples boil over, when he says, "You faithless generation, how much longer must I be among you? How much longer must I put up with you?"

Today, Jesus foretells his death and resurrection a second time. Our translation says that he would be *betrayed* into human hands, but Mark wrote that he would be *handed over*, which is a phrase Mark uses several times in different contexts. John the Baptist was handed over, for example. The enemy of the Son of Man turns out to be – Man. We have met the enemy and he is us, as Pogo once said, but this is the Son of God.

The disciples, again, did not understand and were afraid to ask! They remind me of myself in ninth grade math class. Why did they not understand?

Did they not want to?

Then they came to Capernaum, on the north shore of the lake, and went into *the* house, which might have been Peter's or maybe even Jesus' own. And then Jesus asks them what they were talking about 'on the way.'

The Way was a phrase used by early Christians to mean their personal journey to understanding and also the path on which they walked, so here it might have a double meaning. Either way, these disciples didn't have the gumption to say what they were arguing about.

They could have been talking about whether Elijah was greater than Moses, because a few of them had just witnessed the Transfiguration, or, more likely, they could have been arguing about their own personal advancement in another example of them setting their minds not on divine things but on human things.

Mark records that Jesus then sat down, which is the posture of a teacher, and 'called the twelve,' who were already there, which makes some people wonder whether this episode was pieced together from other material.

Then Jesus took a little child and put *it* among them, and this is where the real lesson begins.

This was not some random child walking through the house on *its* way to somewhere else. This was someone's child, someone who lived in the house. The child's father might have been one of the disciples. More importantly, the child belonged there as much as anyone else belonged there.

But in the first century, a little child was socially invisible. They were the least important and least valued members of society. As one rabbinic teaching put it, "Morning sleep and midday wine and *children's talk* and sitting in the meeting houses of the ignorant people put a man out of the world."¹ In our own time, we have a proverb that says children should be seen and not heard. W.C. Fields once said that "Children should neither be seen or heard from – ever again."

In the first century, if you wanted to advance religiously, you would go study with a rabbi. If you wanted some appointive government office, you would seek the favor of a successful politician. If you wanted to achieve greatness in the business world, you would find a sponsor who could help you do that. It was a quid pro quo system. You help me; I'll help you. Unless you were a little child.

A child is the least able to advance your career and reward you with greatness. They're not even in the running for 'the greatest.' And that was Jesus' point. By taking the child in his arms, Jesus aligned himself with the small and the powerless, perhaps also with those who need help. To serve these people, Jesus said, is to serve God.

Jesus wanted to pass through Galilee unnoticed to avoid any unnecessary distractions. He wanted the disciples to focus on what he was saying, in the same way you might take away a teenager's smart phone, to make them notice the world around them, and to be aware of their place in it. He also wanted his disciples to see God's grace in serving others.

It's not a coincidence that he gave them this teaching right after he told them – again – that he would be handed over, killed, to rise again. We sometimes forget that we follow the teachings of a convicted criminal. No other faith tradition can say that. And that's one of the paradoxes of our faith, that God's creation put the Son of God to death. Another is that to achieve greatness, one must set aside the desire for greatness.

But remember, this is just 'the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.'

Jesus Christ represents God, but who represents Christ? Turns out that it's not only the disciples – and us – it's also the most vulnerable and insignificant members of the faith community.

Jesus' teachings undermine cultural expectations at every turn. This is a radical teaching from an unlikely Messiah. How we engage with it matters not just for the church, but for the communities in which we live and in the greater world at large.

We can't be afraid to welcome the child in our midst when we choose to stand with Jesus, when choosing to stand with Jesus means standing with the weak, with those who need help, with the widows and orphans, with the naked and the hungry.

We represent Jesus when we do those things, and that's the rest of the good news.
Amen.

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¹ *Pirke Aboth* 3:11b, quoted from Danby's edition of the Mishna, p. 451.