

September 20

To Welcome the Child

Mark 9:30-37

As many of you know, I try to plan out what I am going to be preaching in advance so that I can give my music team time to pick hymns and prepare specials that fit with the theme of the day. I usually start with looking at the suggested scriptures for the day that come from the Lectionary, a three year cycle of scriptures that cover most of the Bible. This year as I was reading this account from Mark and those for the next two weeks I noticed how Jesus, in Mark, uses children to make some points about how we are to live our faith. Focusing on Jesus' use of children got me looking at what these passages have to share with us in new ways. So for the next three weeks we are going to be exploring what children, according to Jesus, have to teach us.

As we begin we need to understand the place of children in Jesus day. Without this knowledge we will never understand what point Jesus is trying to make. Our social conventions about children are so radically different from those of antiquity that we do not react with the surprise that people would have had in ancient times at special attention being given to a child. In the ancient world, everyone had their place. And the place of children on society's ladder was very low indeed. This went far beyond the old Victorian attitude that children should be seen and not heard. It placed children in the same category as servants, meaning they had no rights, no status, no independent identity. This view of children was so widespread and so deeply engrained that it carried over well into medieval times. When one famous medieval theologian was asked who you should save first if your house caught on fire, he said, "First you should save your parents. Then you should save your wife. And then you should save your children." This was a perfectly logical answer in those days. It simply reflected the order of things in that period. We need to hold onto this understanding of the place of children in society in Jesus' day as we continue.

Our scripture begins with Jesus, for the second time in Mark, sharing about his impending death and resurrection. It says that they still do not understand what he is saying, and can we blame them? But it also says they were afraid to ask him about it.

We understand how little they understand because just after Jesus talks about his suffering and dying they are talking about who is the most important. The juxtaposition of Jesus' words about his coming suffering and their argument about who is the greatest is Mark at his most ironic. The disciples were acting very childish. When you are around children you realize that the question, "Who is most important?" is a game all children play. They will argue about how my dad or mom is better, taller, smarter, funnier... than yours. They will play the game King of the Hill pushing down all comers to stay on top. They will let you know how they are better than their friends or cousins. In seeing this childish kind of attitude in the disciples is it any wonder that Jesus took a child and placed it in their midst as he gets ready to teach them?

It begins by Jesus reaching for a little child and embracing him. Men did not show this kind of emotions at this time. It was to make a point as to what the kingdom is like -- the reception of a child. The ancient world was infused with a strong sense of honor and shame. Those who were rich and powerful hoped to demonstrate their honor by the company they kept. At the same time, they could further curry favor and influence through highly respectable social relations.

The ancient world had no middle class. Most of the wealth was accumulated at the very top of the social structure, and the bulk of people found themselves poor. Within the elite world, honor was incredibly important. The rich wanted to associate only with other rich, they would intentionally insult and demean those who were slightly less rich, and hoped to accumulate favor with those who were above them.

Against such a backdrop, the words of Jesus in Mark's gospel stand out. Saying that the way to gain honor is to receive those who are without honor goes against the logic of the ancient society. The Kingdom of God assesses and assigns value differently than the human realm. God will receive those who receive the child. And remember a child was on the very bottom of the social ladder. Doing this will give access to true power, the power of the one who sent Jesus. For the disciples who had been talking about who belonged on the top rung of the ladder this rebuke would sting. Jesus was implying that in his dying that he predicted he was trying to live out this injunction. He

was willing to be classed among the lowest, a criminal, knowing that in this he would find blessing.

So what does welcoming the child mean today? While our modern society is different from the ancient one, there are several similarities. We still seek status through cars, clothes, houses, titles, and electronics. It is more subtle than in the past. 150 years ago, if you had wealth, you built the biggest house you could afford so all would know of your wealth. Across the country are these mansions, symbols of wealth. Today symbols of wealth still abound. When the Apple Watch was released, it was revealed that it came in aluminum, stainless steel, and gold versions. This is a piece of electronics that will be obsolete in 2 or 3 years. The only conceivable need for a \$10,000 gold version is status, to proclaim to the world that money can be spent with no correlation to value. It is probably no surprise that demand did not keep up with supply.

To welcome the child is to take seriously the vision of the kingdom of God found here in Mark's gospel. To do so should cause us to consider those with whom we socialize, what food we eat, and what we buy -- decisions which can impact the least among us. To welcome the child means that we need to embrace an idea of servanthood instead of holding on to the status view shared by so many.

There are stories about people who give away their wealth for others. Chuck Feeney, over the last 30 years, has crisscrossed the globe conducting a clandestine operation to give away a \$7.5 billion fortune derived from hawking cognac, perfume and cigarettes in his empire of duty-free shops. As a businessman, Chuck Feeney was remorseless in his pursuit of profit, squirreling away his fortune in tax havens and always driving a hard bargain. He has been no less assiduous in giving all of it away.

His foundation, the Atlantic Philanthropies, has funneled \$6.2 billion into education, science, health care, aging and civil rights in the U.S., Australia, Vietnam, Bermuda, South Africa and Ireland. For the first 15 years of this mission Feeney obsessively hid the type of donations that other tycoons employ publicists to plaster across newspapers. Many charities had no idea where the piles of money were coming from. Those that did were sworn to secrecy. "I had to convince the board of trustees that it was on the level, that there was nothing disreputable and this wasn't Mafia money," says Frank Rhodes, the former president of Cornell University who later chaired Atlantic Philanthropies. "That was difficult." Eventually Feeney was outed.

Few living people have given away more, and no one at his wealth level has ever given their fortune away so completely during their lifetime. Mr. Feeney, who does not own a home and wears a \$20 Casio watch on the basis that it is just as good at keeping time as a luxury brand, embarked on this mission in 1984, in the middle of a decade marked by wealth creation—and conspicuous consumption—when he slyly transferred his entire 38.75% ownership stake in Duty Free Shoppers to what became the Atlantic Philanthropies. “I concluded that if you hung on to a piece of the action for yourself you’d always be worrying about that piece,” People used to ask me how I got my jollies, and I guess I’m happy when what I’m doing is helping people and unhappy when what I’m doing isn’t helping people.”

His “giving while living” philosophy is said to have inspired Warren Buffett and Bill and Melinda Gates to set up their charitable organisations. “Chuck Feeney is a remarkable role model,” Bill Gates tells FORBES, “and the ultimate example of giving while living.”

Asked about his ambitions, Mr. Feeney once said: “I want the last check I write to bounce.”

To welcome the child is to see every person as one of worth. Remember that image of Jesus taking and cuddling a child in the midst of questions about status and saying when you welcome a child as I am doing then you find your true place in God’s kingdom. To do this means looking beyond the status issues to the individual. As we said a child had no status. It was shameful what Jesus was doing. Yet we know it was right.

Who are the children around you, those whom you would not talk to? Are they the immigrant, the poor, the ill educated...Jesus wants you to see them as people of worth and value. Jesus wants you to move off of your status ideas and embrace all in love. Then you will know what it means to be first in God’s kingdom.