

Sermon Text: Mark 9:30-37

9/23/2018

My dad always had a recliner chair in the living room that belonged to him. One of my earliest and fondest childhood memories is of my dad holding me while sitting in his recliner chair and watching television late at night. I was cuddled. I was nurtured. I was loved.

And so when I read the scripture lesson we have before us today, I see myself as that little child Jesus would reach for, place among the twelve disciples, and embrace whole heartedly. When Jesus does this, it is a profound statement of values that were counter-cultural and counter-intuitive for that time and place. What Jesus was essentially saying was that this is where children belong: in the embrace of God—sheltered, protected, cared for, and loved.

For many of us, this may seem like a no-brainer lesson. Of course Jesus loves the little children; all the children of the world. But there are plenty of full grown people, including the disciples in this passage of scripture, who do not yet know the love of Jesus in this way.

Despite the memory I shared with you, I will be the first to admit that my own childhood was less than perfect. And when I took a class on compassion cultivation several years ago, one of the meditation exercises was to meditate on one's childhood self. The idea behind this is that if you can visualize your childhood self, speak to your childhood self, accept your childhood self, this will give rise to having compassion for one's own self, which will then grow into compassion for others.

So often we like to equate childhood with innocence, but as sensitive and vulnerable creatures, young people are deeply affected by their environment, expectations, and pressures. So when Jesus teaches the

disciples to approach God like a child, He is really teaching the disciples a lesson in compassion.

In fact if we trace the narrative of this lesson, it begins with Jesus teaching the disciples of his future death and what we call His “passion.” It then moves into the disciples having heated competition with each other (with a Muhammed Ali argument of who is the “Greatest,”), and then Jesus reorients them to the more Godly way of compassion.

The Passion of Jesus—The competition of the disciples— The compassion of God.

When we are confronted with the grim realities of life, it is easier for us to become childish rather than child-like. To be childish is to be petty and immature and the way the disciples respond to Jesus and his foretelling of his death and resurrection demonstrates an immaturity of their faith. The scripture tells us, “They didn’t understand this kind of talk, and they were afraid to ask him.”

And this is where their journey to Capernaum becomes like that road trip where the kids are antagonizing each other in the back seat. And our contemporary mind might go to Jesus at the steering wheel, and looking in the rearview mirror, and saying to these squabbling disciples in the back seat, “If I have to pull over this car and come back there. . .”

I mean, I want that to be the narrative because that’s a familiar parenting trope for our time, but that’s not what Jesus does at all. Instead, once they have arrived to their destination in Capernaum, Jesus steers his followers toward self reflection, and he asks them: “What were you arguing about during the journey?” And the disciples don’t even respond to his question. They simply do not give him an answer for their immature and argumentative behavior, much less give

him the topic they were fighting over.

And from this interaction we might reflect on our own lives and ponder how extremely patient God has been with us. When we look into the rearview mirror of our lives and we see that writing on it which says, “Things in Mirror May be Larger Than They Appear,” there’s a good chance, they probably are!

We aren’t always listening for the questions God has for us—not only about our past, but for our future. Even when we do hear God’s questions, we might not respond, knowing full well God already knows what’s going on in our hearts and minds. And despite our lack of response, our God remains compassionate, loving and caring, and even reaches out for us to put us in the company of others who don’t really have all the answers either.

When Jesus places the child amongst the disciples, he says, “Whoever wants to be first must be least of all and servant of all.” And he says this to counteract the values that are tugging at the disciples. The competition for wealth, power, and prestige is simply not a value of God’s Kingdom and this is what makes Jesus’s passion so difficult for them and for us to understand.

You might notice that in the background of our stained glass windows on the west wall, they all have palm trees. In the window with Jesus and the children, there are three palm trees total, but two are at one side and the third is on the other side. When items in Christian art are grouped in twos it is usually symbolic of the dual nature of Jesus Christ as both divine and human. Groups of three in Christian art are usually symbolic of the Holy Trinity of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. But the palm trees in particular symbolize Jesus’s humble, yet triumphant entry

in to Jerusalem as the crowds shouted, “Hosanna,” which means “Save us, now!”

The passion and journey to the cross was not what the Jewish people anticipated in a Messiah or an anointed one who would liberate God’s chosen people from their suffering. But salvation is in the background of these windows in the use of the palm trees and we can also see that there is what looks to be a family walking along a path leading to Jesus. And this tells us something about what this church values in terms of what salvation is about.

For Methodists, salvation is more than a one time event in which a person becomes saved. Many churches teach an incomplete doctrine of salvation that is exclusionary and caters to conformity. The concept of “salvation” for many outside the church has become misunderstood due to the prescriptive rules that have been placed on the idea of “being saved.” Salvation does not always happen with a particular prayer or a decision you make for Christ. Salvation in its fullest sense happens when God reaches out to you, whether or not you already had a hand raised and drowning in sin.

One of the things that makes Methodism different from other Christian sects is that John Wesley taught of the Way of Salvation. He taught of the different ways in which we experience God’s unmerited grace in our lives and the potential for falling away from grace. For us, once saved does not mean always saved and salvation is really about God’s healing mercies within ourselves, within our relationships, and within God.

By God’s grace, Jesus continues to reach out, gather us into community and welcome us equally into His love, mercy and care.

I have recently been reading a book called, *The Spiritual Life of Children*, written in 1990 by Robert Coles, psychiatrist and professor at Harvard University. And in this book there is a chapter on Christian Salvation. In his interview with two Catholic girls who were nine years old at the time he asked them what the central message is about their religion. And Mary responded to his question with a question. She said, "You mean why Jesus came here and why He died?" her interviewer simply nodded and she went on to give an impressive explanation of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and what that means for us. Subsequent interviews went on with the girls over two years and what Coles noticed was that they described Jesus's life on earth as a "visit" and through their religious imagination they began to construct for themselves what church was all about. (pp 203-208) Coles writes, "He came here to visit us, those children keep telling me, and His visit was meant to be a 'promise' --- of salvation, no less. That 'visit' was important, was providential, they take pains to say." (p 208) he goes on to say, "For many Christian children, Jesus becomes not so much a revered, inspirational figure, nor God's Son, hence powerful and knowing beyond measure, but a children's Savior" the one who survived childhood and later suffering, and is still very much present."

When it comes to our mature faith, we might welcome God into our lives as though God is a child too. Like a child, we once knew coming back into view, like a child born anew, Jesus comes. Welcoming God like a child means that we welcome and accept our child-like selves and reflect that divine presence with God back into the world. It is indeed a paradox that to have a mature faith, one must have the wonder and awe of a child.

Without a doubt, we as a church hold the collective value that children belong in this sacred space. And if you have been around the church campus just in this last week, you would see and hear children in the

preschool learning, laughing and sometimes crying. You would encounter the Boy Scouts and the Girl Scouts full of activity and friendship. You would see children rehearsing their parts for the local theatre, and young musicians practicing for their recitals. You would see children packing boxes of supplies for other children in need around the world. This! This is where children belong!-- even if you may not see the evidence on Sunday morning in worship!

This sacred space that God makes holy day after day is full of the life and love of children because we intentionally welcome children here. So I hope this week, you might welcome your old childhood self into your prayer life. Jesus welcomes it. Invite God into your heart as though God is a vulnerable child too. Take the opportunity to trade competition for wealth, power, and prestige and for the kingdom values of acceptance, welcome, and equality. Pray about the way children belong in the embrace of God—sheltered, protected, cared for, and loved. It may move you to do likewise.

Thy kingdom come. Amen.