

In the name of God. Amen.

I.

Jesus loves the little children...all the children of the world ...red and yellow, black and white ... they are precious in his sight ... Jesus loves the little children of the world. We can hardly say those lines without singing them. The words reflect what the church understands to have been Jesus' attitude toward children as it is described in the Gospels and as it has been handed down to us in the church today.

When Jesus finds the disciples arguing about who is the greatest among them, Jesus turns to a child -- to "the least of these," to show them how the kingdom of God is to be understood and how the person who follows him - then and now - is to understand power and prestige, place and position.¹

Competition for power, wealth and prestige infects all the cultures included in the Roman Empire (as it does the cultures of the modern world), and apparently the disciples share in those values.²

A heartbreaking element in today's gospel is that the disciples simply do not get it. "They do not understand what Jesus is saying and are afraid to ask him." There is an acute poignancy in this passage. Jesus has been with the crowds and has responded to their great needs by offering healing and release to the tormented people who come to him. But now he wants his friends to himself. They pass through Galilee, the evangelist tells us, but "He does not want anyone to know it; for he is teaching his disciples. . ."

II.

This is a crucial time for Jesus. He is trying to tell his disciples something tragic and inevitable about himself. He wants to be alone with those he has chosen, to prepare them for the sorrow and shock of his arrest and death; maybe he also longs to receive the human understanding that is so essential to every human being, the assurance that at least these, his best friends, care for what he is showing them about God's kingdom, so that they can carry on his work after his death.³ "But they do not understand" (Mark 9.32).

They arrive in Capernaum. When they are in the house where they will be staying, Jesus, – to make his point – asks them, "What were you arguing about on the way here?" (Mark 9.35). They are silent because on the way, they had argued with one another about who was the greatest. Jesus sits down, calls the twelve and says to them, "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all." Then he does the oddest thing. "He takes a child and puts the child among them. Then, "taking the child in his arms, in a loving embrace, he says to them: "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me. And whoever welcomes me welcomes not me, but the one who sent me" (Mark 9.37).

Because we live in the 21st century, we might not find this extraordinary. Because we love our children, we might not find anything unusual about Jesus' action. It is easy for us post-resurrection people to scoff at them and wonder, "How could they have been so blind?" For the disciples who are listening to Jesus, however, a child is equated on a status level of a servant – without value – the "least of these." Jesus gesture is extraordinary.

Against this background, however, Jesus' teaching becomes clear. Not only does Jesus himself honor and welcome a

¹ The Reverend William C. Noble. Pentecost 15, Proper 20 Sermon September 24, 2000.

² Amy C. Howe. *Feasting on the Word. Year B. Volume 4.* "Proper 18 (Sunday Between September 4 and September 10 inclusive).. A Pastoral Perspective." (Louisville, Westminster, 2011) 44-48.

³ Katerina Whitley. Pentecost 15, Proper 20 Sermon September 21, 2003.

mere child (v. 36), we are to equate welcoming the “other”, – the stranger, the child – with welcoming Jesus himself – and even more, with welcoming the God who sent him.

III.

Throughout history, we know many who have paid a heavy price for faithfulness to God. Many have carried the cross of justice and mercy in great issues. Those who opposed slavery in our nation were persecuted and condemned. Those who fought for child labor laws and those who sought safety and fair wages in the work place were beaten. Those who champion the equality of women, black people, gays and lesbians; those who oppose war have been criticized and vilified – often in the name of religion.

For most of us, the suffering we experience is not from championing great causes of justice. Suffering and doubt and confusion finds us in the midst of our lives. Many of us live in wounded relationships with a spouse, with our parents, with children, friends. Some of us receive dreadful medical diagnoses. Others of us are visited by depression and failure. At one time or another most of us have felt alone, resented, confused. At such times, God can seem so absent.

At times such as these, the Gospel is a great gift. In Mark, we see a very human Jesus – a Jesus confused and burdened by rejection and persecution. If one is not careful, one might pass over this, fail to see Jesus sharing the burden of being human. The danger, of course, is not recognizing the Jesus who knows our weaknesses and understands our fear, one who is by that very fact, able and willing to stand with us, in the midst of our crises.

It has been said, Jesus brings comfort to those who lack comfort. And conversely, Jesus challenges those who are comfortable. Those who find themselves in a good position, relationships going well, job okay, health seems fine – those who feel comfortable, are to hear a different message from the Gospel. In our comfort, we might well be grateful to God. But at the same time, we might seek to avoid those who lack comfort, fearing that their pain may “rub” off or drag us from our comfort.

True gratitude, though, is expressed in an active concern for the well being of others – all others. Gratitude offers us a vision of our relationship with one another. A great writer of the Middle Ages, Meister Eckhard professes: God calls sisters and brothers to care for and serve one another. In that way, one person sustains another, and that is why all people are interconnected.

IV.

Our faith is not meant to separate us from others. All authentic spirituality, in fact, is interconnected by one’s relationship with another. Faith does not divide us into the saved and lost, believers and non-believers, good and evil, rich and poor, doctors and lawyers, faithful and unfaithful. Such attitudes use faith to condemn rather than to comfort.

When he sets the child in the disciples’ midst, Jesus emphasizes this point. *Whoever receives one who is in need of comfort and care, one who is totally dependant, receives me, says Jesus. And whoever receives me, receives the one who sent me* (Mark 9.37).

By word and example, St. Christopher’s has promised to “welcome the child” in a very real and concrete way for over 50 years through our Montessori School. Then, our students were local “island” kids. Today, 50 years later, we extend that welcome to children and families from all over the world.

Today, is Backpack Sunday. In a few minutes, we will bless the backpacks of our students as an outward and visible sign of not only welcoming the “child” in our midst, but also recognizing and welcoming the inward and spiritual grace of Christ in our midst. Amen.