

## **SOMETHING ABOUT A CHILD**

Sermon Preached by Jon M. Walton

September 20, 2009

Scripture: Psalm 1, Mark 9:30-37

In the town where I grew up in Missouri there was an ice cream parlor that everybody loved called Ozenbergers. They had a small triangular parking lot, so on a warm summer evening the place looked like the Magnolia Bakery on Bleecker Street, a line trailing out the door. This was before Baskin and Robbins, and before they had those little pull out tapes with numbers so that you would know who was next. This was, after all, the Midwest and everybody was polite and waited their turn and nobody crowded in front of anybody else. It was like the Kingdom of Heaven, don't you know.

I must have been about nine years old on the evening in question, not yet having experienced the growth spurt of a teenager, so that when I got to the counter, you could barely see me behind the tall ice cream freezers with the glass fronts where the big containers of ice cream were being scooped.

I waited a long time, and I think several people were served ahead of me and out of turn. They must have been visiting from New York the way they crowded ahead of me. I finally had to speak up and say that I wanted some ice cream too. One of the teenagers behind the counter took pity on me, realizing the oversight, and dipped the cones I requested and took my money.

By the time I got back to the car perhaps fifteen minutes had passed and my mother was wondering what had happened to me. I explained that other people got ahead of me and some of the big kids who were working there behind the counter, didn't see me.

I don't know what it was about that slight that got my mother's dander up, but she decided that no kid going into Ozenbergers Ice Cream parlor would ever be overlooked again. She grabbed me by the arm pulled me out of the car, and took me back inside. She elbowed her way past the other people standing there, and started dressing down one of the "pre-barristas" of the frozen dessert emporium, saying that "her little kid had been in there for fifteen minutes and no one had paid attention to him, and this better not happen again, and you need to look over the counter to see who's there..." almost all of it said in one breath. Suddenly my mother had turned into an advocate for short people, which I had never really considered myself to be until then.

And with that much we whirled out of Ozenbergers leaving the teenage crew standing there, duly chastened and warned, and probably thinking "what the heck's wrong with that woman?" But I will never forget that day that my mother stood up for me, quite literally, and demanded that I be noticed. It was a lesson I never forgot. That kids can be overlooked when they're small. And because of what she did, which I still marvel at, I felt loved and protected and honored as important that day.

There was another day long ago like that. Different place, different time. It was a long day, an exhausting day. It began when Jesus healed an epileptic child to the surprise and confusion of his disciples. I preached on that healing story this past summer. Later that day, there was a certain mood in the air because Jesus told his followers that he was going to be betrayed and die and rise again. And that didn't sit well with them.

And then, for some reason the disciples began to bicker among themselves as to which one was the greatest among them. I guess the talk about death got them wondering who would inherit the mantle of authority. This was a recurring discussion for the Twelve, according to Mark. Mark's take is that the Twelve were a bit slow on the uptake and always jockeying for position and favors.

And so it was in the midst of the confusion of that day, with all of its disjointedness and mixed feelings, that Jesus answered the disciples' grumbling about greatness with an object lesson that still gives us pause. He took a child and put her in the midst of them and taking her into his arms, he said to the disciples, "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all. And whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me..."

There is a parallel passage in the next chapter of Mark's gospel that builds on what happens there. People evidently were bringing children to Jesus so that he might touch them. After all, he'd just healed an epileptic and he had praised the welcome of children. But the disciples who had their own ideas about who should get to Jesus, didn't want Jesus distracted by kids crying and crawling all over him and they tried to stop the parents from bringing their kids to him. But Jesus said, "Do not stop them, for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. Whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it."

I don't know about you, but I really like that passage. It teases my imagination. It's comforting and warm. I think every Sunday School classroom from the 1940s on has had some artistic expression of a pastel Jesus with Clairol hair in a white robe sitting on a rock or a bench and there are little children all around with one singled out in front of him.

And underneath the picture is the quote, "Suffer the little children to come to me."

This is an image of Jesus that we like, the Jesus that takes the children and places them front and center and honors them. "Become like this," he says, "It is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs."

So the song...

Jesus loves the little children, all the little children of the world, Red and yellow, black and white, all are precious in his sight. Jesus loves the little children of the world.

And why? Because, to such as these, Jesus says, the kingdom of God belongs and whoever does not receive the kingdom like a child will never enter it.

But you know, I wonder how much, practically speaking, we really want to do that... become like children. Children are great, don't get me wrong. I love children. Jesus loves the little children. Parents love children. Grandparents especially love children and spoil them beyond recognition. But children (can we talk here as adults?)... children do not act like angels.

Reinhold Niebuhr, the Christian ethicist and social observer used to say that all children are isolationists and imperialists, "My toys are my toys, and your toys are my toys too." And if you've ever watched young children play there is a lot of aggressive behavior that has to be channeled sometimes. A lot of jockeying for position and favors, just like the disciples. Kids know how to work the system to their advantage, and they can be moody and selfish.

Brothers and sisters on long journeys in the back seat have to be restrained from global thermonuclear war sometimes, which is why all these suburban vans now have television screens in the backseat. Better to try to numb the children with DVD cartoons than to try to get them to be kind to one another. And anybody can tell you that the junior high years are not ones that most of us would want to go back to, or live through again. Parents barely make it through that time with their kids.

Our tendency is to romanticize children's lives and never more so than that picture in our mind of that child in Jesus' arms with Jesus saying, "Become like this, for to such as these the kingdom of God belongs."

I have always wondered what is about a child that Jesus would have us emulate. Is it the naiveté of children? The openness and curiosity and inquisitiveness of a child? Is it the ability of children to trust, and therefore the readiness to believe the expansive, marvelous, awesome nature of God? Or maybe it's their impulsiveness, the spontaneity that is so refreshing when laid beside our adult routines and reserve.

I've always thought it was something about getting inside the mind of a child that was what Jesus was getting at; to recapture a child's perspective and frame of mind. The quality children have to suspend judgment long enough to believe in a Hogwarts School or a Land of Oz or a series of unfortunate events and preposterous predicaments befalling Lemony Snicket. That other world of reality and imagination that children can see and that we adults don't any more. I've always thought it was something like that that Jesus wanted us to emulate in children, as if faith were the suspension of reason.

But more and more I've come to believe that that is a typically adult way to try to understand what Jesus is saying and that's not what this passage invites us to do.

The clue is in the verses that follow in Chapter 9 of Mark's gospel, just after Jesus says, "Become like a child," and there is this abrupt shift of focus onto an exchange between John and Jesus that seems to have nothing to do with children. John is upset that somebody has been casting out demons in Jesus' name and the disciples try to stop him, because, well, the text is very specific, "He's not one of us." That's what they say. He's not one of us.

Now I always thought this was a disruption to the story about the children, because the discussion of children picks up again right after this encounter.

But now I am wondering if maybe this is really the same conversation, and that Mark has very intentionally introduced it here as an interruption, as if the disciples are trying to change the subject. They don't understand what Jesus is talking about when he says that they should become like children. So they try to change the subject.

Why do I think the two stories are connected? Because of the phrase that John uses to describe the healer who is using Jesus' name but is not a disciple. "We stopped him," John says, "because *he was not one of us.*" And that's the link to the teaching about children.

Gary Charles, in his commentary on Mark's gospel suggests, "There are few phrases in any language that are uglier than he was *not one of us*. The disciples discover someone who brings wholeness to broken lives, giving credit to Jesus for the healing. Do the disciples then come running to Jesus and say, "Hallelujah! The lame can walk. The blind can see. The possessed can think straight again."? No. They say, "Rabbi, we saw someone casting out demons in your name and we tried to stop him, because he was *not one of us.*" [Like] the child being held by Jesus.... the disciples... don't get it."<sup>1</sup>

"Holding a child before him Jesus talks to the Twelve about a category of existence. He speaks about those in society, no matter their age, who are always last in line and are valued the least by society. Jesus is asking his disciples to extend their hands and hearts to those who often feel only the back of the hand and the hardness of the human heart. A child for Jesus is more akin to an outcast, a person we avoid intentionally, than to an infant whom church members coo over in a nursery."<sup>2</sup>

And now the passage about becoming like children is far more difficult to follow than we first anticipated. Because it asks us to see the world from the perspective of one who can barely see over the counter and whom the owner would rather not have in the store. The person who is on the margin, at the fringe, not easy for us to accommodate. The ones we are more comfortable overlooking.

In the church, the tendency is too much to become ingrown, to welcome only those we know and who are like us. To make judgments about one another as the Twelve did, about who can claim to be a follower and who cannot. "We forbid him," John said, "because he was not one of us."

It's only natural, I suppose. People who *like* each other, and who *are like* each other, seek each other out. But God is calling us to be a more intentional community of people than that, daring enough to welcome the stranger, to invite inside the one who is outside, the one who does not fit in, and so to see the world with more compassionate eyes than we usually do. In other words, to see the world like a child does, not with naiveté, but from the perspective of powerlessness, exclusion, barrier and rejection... the kind that children can tell us about if we will pay attention to what they say. The ones who can tell us what it is like not to be noticed or welcome.

In the neighborhood where I live in there is a family that has befriended a homeless man. And they did so because of several reasons, but especially because one of the children in the family decided that they should. The mother told me the story.

It seems that one day, the older of the two kids stopped and talked with Henry, the homeless man who hangs out on a storefront stoop most mornings just down from their apartment. It was not exactly what the parents wanted at the outset, their eight year old son starting a conversation with this young homeless man, but it was unavoidable the first time and awkward to stop. Alex, the boy, is about as tall as Henry is short when Henry sits on the stoop, so they met eye to eye. It was natural for Alex to ask him what he was doing down there. "What are you doing?" Alex asked. "Hangin' out," Henry said.

After the first time they spoke, the mother said to Alex, "Honey, I don't want you to talk to Henry unless dad or I are with you. Okay?" Which led Alex to say, "Why not?"

"Well, homeless people have problems and we don't know what kind of problems Henry has; and well, it's kind of complicated." To which Alex said, "If Henry has problems maybe we can help him." Kids say those kind of things!

"Honey, I think Henry has too many problems for us to help him."

So the next day, when Alex saw Henry he said, "My mom says you have problems. What kind of problems do you have?"

Before long every day Alex and Henry had conversations, casual friendly, supervised, but cordial. Even the parents softened in their approach to Henry. Sometimes on a cold winter morning Alex would take Henry some hot oatmeal and a cup of coffee to warm himself.

Other times mom and Alex made Henry a sandwich, the same kind of sandwich that Alex was taking for lunch that day at school. And so it went, over time.

One day Henry wasn't around for a few days. So the family made some inquiries and found that Henry was sick and in St. Vincent's, charity case you know, so the family went down to visit him. They bought him TV coverage for a few days; took him a newspaper.

Henry recovered and before long he was back out on the street again in the old neighborhood. And it's been going on for a long time now, about a year. The family and Henry have come to know each other pretty well. In fact, for Alex's ninth birthday party, when his parents asked what friends he would like to have at his party, among the guests was Henry. I don't know what the other parents thought about this homeless man from the corner being there, but I do know that Alex wasn't having a party with cake and ice cream and the Balloon Man unless Henry was there among his friends. You know how kids are....

I would love it if the church could be more like that, childlike in its readiness to see things as a child can see them, and ready to welcome those that children notice.

Wouldn't that be something?

Jesus said, Whoever does not receive the kingdom of heaven as a little child will never enter it. And he took them up in his arms, laid his hands on them, and blessed them.

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<sup>1</sup> Gary Charles, **Preaching Mark in Two Voices**. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002. 183

<sup>2</sup> Charles, 182.