

THE
SEVENTHEENTH
SUNDAY AFTER
PENTECOST

The Rev.
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Mark 9:30-37

Radical Welcome

There is a sign that hangs in Our Lady of Lourdes Catholic Community to greet people as they enter. It is a long sign and it reads:

We extend a special welcome to those who are single, married, divorced, gay, filthy rich, dirt poor, yo no habla Ingles. We extend a special welcome to those who are crying new-borns, skinny as a rail or could afford to lose a few pounds.

We welcome you if you can sing like Andrea Bocelli or like our pastor who can't carry a note in a bucket. You're welcome here if you're "just browsing," just woke up or just got out of jail. We don't care if you're more Catholic than the Pope, or haven't been in church since little Joey's Baptism.

We extend a special welcome to those who are over 60 but not grown up yet, and to teenagers who are growing up too fast. We welcome soccer moms, NASCAR dads, starving artists, tree-huggers, latte-sippers, vegetarians, junk-food eaters. We welcome those who are in recovery or still addicted. We welcome you if you're having problems or you're down in the dumps or if you don't like "organized religion," we've been there too.

If you blew all your offering money at the dog track, you're welcome here. We offer a special welcome to those who think the earth is flat, work too hard, don't work, can't spell, or because grandma is in town and wanted to go to church.

We welcome those who are inked, pierced or both. We offer a special welcome to those who could use a prayer right now, had religion shoved down your throat as a kid or got lost in traffic and wound up here by mistake. We welcome tourists, seekers and doubters, bleeding hearts ... and you!¹

This sign of radical welcome is a perfect illustration of the vision of society Jesus preaches to his disciples. What we hear today is in essence "a staff meeting"; Jesus is speaking directly to those who are closest to him, doing the work he has called them to do.

The disciples were squabbling about rank, so Jesus brings in a child to make a point about welcome; and what a point. Because he didn't say that whoever welcomes a child does the work of the faithful, or serves God well, or gets brownie points.

He says "whoever welcomes the child welcomes me and ultimately the one who sent me. Jesus tells those on the inside to open up the doors as wide as wide can be to those who have no status or rank and in so doing we will be asking God to be right at home.

This is powerful and provocative statement. Jesus is once again upending the notion that might makes right or that society and culture should be stratified. Competition for power, wealth and prestige infected all of the cultures in the Roman Empire, just as it does in the cultures of today and Jesus is having none of it with his disciples.

Jesus casts a vision of society, church and family that is based on access and acceptance. This child in Jesus' embrace represented the exact opposite of rank and status.

A child in the first century world was an insignificant part of an adult oriented culture; they held no honor or power. It doesn't mean that parents didn't love their children, but it does mean that in the larger society, outside of the home, a child held no status what so ever.

When you welcomed a child or others like a child who had no status in society, you were never going to move up the social or corporate ladder---there would be no "payback" in such a welcome; what they would receive instead was the amazing nearness of God.

Now, I am about to make a transition that may give you sermon whiplash, but hopefully in the end I will bring the point back home...

¹ Facebook Posting

I recently read a quote in a blog² that was attributed to D.H. Lawrence, and while I could not find any proof of whether he said this or not, it presented something interesting to think on so I'm running with it. It said:
"The children are not the future. The living truth is the future. Time and people do not make the future... Fifty million children growing up purposeless, with no purpose save the attainment of their own individual desires, these are not the future, they are only a disintegration of the past. The future is in living, growing truth." (D. H. Lawrence?)

As I pondered this in light of Jesus' words to his cohort it reminded me we should be wary of sentimentality. When we think of Jesus in this passage we can have a tendency to move toward warm and fuzzy images of Jesus meek and mild welcoming children to Sunday school.

Sentiment of this kind has the danger of trivializing this radical thing Jesus is asking us to do. Because when we think about it, using children as the example as Jesus does, we might acknowledge that in and of them, children aren't a cause for hope. They are just people, like the rest of us. Just because kids might have more time ahead of them than we do doesn't mean that they are going to make things better for humanity as a whole.

Cuteness doesn't bring about sufficient change or the world would be far lovelier by now. But that isn't pessimism. It's just rejecting sentimentality.

I don't think that Jesus pulled the child towards him to make a sweet point about children's innocence. Jesus calls us to a radical hope for the world that comes from a greater truth than mere youth. Hope comes from the capital T – Truth that lives with us and works before, between, and behind us all.³

Mark shows us Jesus as this Truth, declaring that things change if we *welcome* the children and others like them rather than mindlessly seeking after our own pride of place.

Worrying about our own status or comfort zones turns our gaze inwards to a very dangerous place. I have known of many churches who found great pride in being the "elite" church in town---the church where the movers and shakers are to be found. This expression of faith community strikes a death blow to everything Jesus hopes those who follow him will be.

But if we understand and embrace Jesus' Truth we see that our call is to create true solidarity and community *with* those who have no status or power; to become ONE with those whom Jesus invites us to embrace.

Welcome for all is vital for Christian community. Radical welcome demands that we be open to others, being aware of their comfort – or discomfort – with a situation--- and then setting aside our own priorities to offer understanding, acceptance, love and support.

If nothing else, this is what we should be teaching the children in our midst and then the children *really will* be our future. But if we fail to teach them this by both our words and deeds it will be as the quote above said, *"Fifty million children growing up purposeless, with no purpose save the attainment of their own individual desires, these are not the future, they are only a disintegration of the past"*

And, of course, it's bigger than children; Jesus is including everyone who is smaller and weaker or needy and hungry, or less courageous, or lonely, or struggling, or tired, or sad--- a list which in fact describes almost anyone of us at some time or another.⁴

The welcome sign that hangs in Our Lady of Lourdes Catholic Church is a call to mission; a call to radical hospitality and a vision of the kind of church we all would say we want to be a part of. We all know that this is far easier said than done, and it doesn't just happen by accident; it takes intentional thought and action as well as giving up our own need for status and power.

I have shared with some of you in Bible Study the story of when a homeless couple—I'll call David and Michelle---finally took me up on my offer to join me in church. They came in I went and welcomed them and escorted them to "my" pew and I was feeling pretty holy and self righteous right up until the moment I was kneeling beside David at the altar rail and realized I was about to have to take the cup right after him---as I was looking in horror at his unkempt beard and teeth I suddenly had the mask pulled off my self- righteousness and saw how shallow my welcome really was. I discovered then how much work I had to do to be the child of God I hoped to be.

And all of this may sound like yet another huge demand, but it is in fact a liberating journey. When we learn to receive and embrace others for exactly who they are, we suddenly find a deeper acceptance of the ways we ourselves fear we do not measure up.

That is the way it is when we listen closely to Jesus and have the courage to follow---that is the crazy paradox of the last being first---we find that what is good for those we would call other is the very thing we need to feel most at home in God ourselves. Amen.

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² Katie Munlich, *Presbyterian Weekly*

³ Ibid.

⁴ Lectionary Preaching, Volume 3.