



SAINT THOMAS CHURCH FIFTH AVENUE
in the City of New York
The Reverend Canon Carl F. Turner, Rector
www.SaintThomasChurch.org

Sunday, September 26, 2021
The Eighteenth Sunday After Pentecost

Festal Eucharist
11am

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A Sermon by
The Reverend Canon Carl F. Turner, *Rector*
on
Numbers 11:4-6, 10-16, 24-29, and Mark 9:38-40
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Embracing the Child Within

Today's Gospel story begins with the Disciples affronted that someone was using the name of Jesus to perform an exorcism. We need to remember that, earlier in chapter nine, they had been pretty hopeless at casting out a demon themselves. You may recall the story of the little boy who was having seizures and had been deaf and dumb from birth, and the pathetic sight of his Father begging Jesus to help them which resulted in this exchange: The father said to Jesus, "*If you can do anything, have pity on us and help us.*" Jesus said to him, "*If you can! All things are possible to him who believes,*" to which the desperate father responds, "*I believe; help my unbelief!*"

No wonder the disciples were put out! They had failed to exorcise that particular demon, but now, to make things worse, someone who was *not* one of the Twelve was, clearly, getting quite good at it and so they try to stop him. This story is reminiscent of our Old Testament Lesson today when God pours his Spirit on to the 70 elders. Two of them had not gone to the Tent of Meeting but, nevertheless, receive God's Spirit and begin to prophesy. "*My lord Moses, stop them!*" said Joshua, but Moses said to him, "*Are you jealous for my sake? Would that all the Lord's people were prophets, and that the Lord would put his spirit on them!*" In a similar way, Jesus responds to the disciples' request to stop the man casting out demons: "*Do not stop him.*" Those same words will appear again but in a very different context just a few verses later in Chapter 10.

There, we observe the Disciples having another bad day, because they are now speaking sternly to little children and trying to prevent the parents bringing them to Jesus. And they do this after Jesus had set a child in their midst as an example to them! An indignant Jesus exclaims, "*Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it.*" (see Mark 10:13-16) Which is, incidentally, exactly how Chapter 9 of Mark's Gospel begins – "*Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see that the kingdom of God has come with power.*" (Mark 9:1)

So, threaded through these passages in Chapter 9 and the beginning of Chapter 10 is teaching about the Kingdom and how different the Kingdom of God is from human society. Key to this teaching is the presence of children and their relationship to Jesus.

In quick succession, we have four stories relating to children:

- The little boy that the Disciples cannot heal;

- The child that Jesus places in the midst of the disciples to deal with the question “Who is the greatest?” (which we heard last week) then, in today’s Gospel reading,
- the consequences of putting a stumbling block before the ‘little ones,’ and finally,
- Jesus blessing the little children and inviting them to come to him.

At this point, we need to understand the significance of the child in the Bible. In ancient times, and at the time of Jesus, children had no status apart from that which they shared with their parents, either birth parents or adoptive parents. To *lose* those parents – in other words, to find oneself an orphan - was to become the *least* of all in society. The Hebrew Scriptures regularly speak of widows and *orphans* as being the poorest and having the least influence in society. We should also remember that in the Bible, the opposite of poverty is not riches – it is power. Yet, in the Kingdom of God, Jesus says that it is the *child* that will be the example of greatness. This seems to be contradictory and, of course, it is. Now, there is further irony about this, for the Greek word for ‘child’ which we heard in last week’s Gospel reading (Mark 9:33-37), has a double meaning - it can also mean slave or be interpreted as servant. So, when Jesus uses a child as an example, he is not simply talking in sentimental terms about lost innocence or a child’s need for love and nurture; when Jesus placed the child in the midst of the disciples and embraced the child, he showed them how he would make *himself* of no status. Former Theologian in Residence, Victor Austin said these powerful words when preaching on that text here in Saint Thomas Church:

*“The disciples, servant-like, are standing, the ancient position of subservience, and Jesus is sitting, the ancient position of authority. Sitting, he summons a child to come and stand in the midst of the disciples. And then he embraces the child. Embracing the child, Jesus does not need to stand; Jesus sitting and the child standing are on a level with each other. They are equal. And yet Jesus sitting is in authority, is the great one; and the child standing is subservient to the sitting one who is great. This is a picture of the kingdom of heaven. It is not a sentimental picture about children, about their cuteness or innocence or some other nonsense. It is a dynamic picture of the change that happens to greatness in the kingdom of heaven. Jesus through his embrace identifies himself with the child, with the one who stands, with the servant. And so Jesus is on both sides of the embrace. He is the great one who sits with authority; he is also the meek and voiceless one who stands and serves.”*¹

It is a dynamic picture of the change that happens to greatness in the kingdom of heaven.

Jesus revealed this in a kind of enacted parable on the night that he was betrayed, by taking off his outer garment, girding himself with a towel, and washing the feet of his disciples, and inviting his disciples to do the same to others.

So, when Jesus invites *us* to become like children – he is inviting us to become the lowest – to become the servants of others; to resist the abuse of power. In fact, to risk giving it up entirely in a Kingdom which is not of this world, that is counter-cultural, and challenges the way that power is so often used and abused by others.

As we read in Paul’s letter to the Philippians:

*“[He] emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave,
being born in human likeness.
And being found in human form,
he humbled himself
and became obedient to the point of death—
even death on a cross.”* (Philippians 2:5-8)

This may help us understand why he said such difficult and challenging words to his disciples: *“If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea.”* (Mark 9:42)

The one who embraced the child and identified himself with servanthood, also reminded his disciples of the true cost of discipleship and the responsibility that comes with it. And to ensure that they truly understand how important not being a stumbling block to others is, Jesus illustrates this with some shocking words about self-mutilation. Now he is not, of course, talking about actual bodily harm (after all, his ministry brought healing and release to those who had physical disabilities) no, he is speaking as he so often does in parables, but in a way that would shock his hearers.

And a little word about the use of the word ‘hell’ in this passage (how this chapter is so rich in details!) which makes us think of an other-worldly place far away inhabited by the Devil. In this passage, the word *hell* is a translation of the Aramaic word *Gebenna* which is not some fantastical place but a real place – a ravine south of Jerusalem renowned in the Hebrew Scriptures because some ancient kings had sacrificed (wait for it) *children* with *fire*. To the Rabbis at the time of Jesus, Gehenna was a kind of purgatory; a place where you went to atone for your sins; where you went to repent, which means *to turn around* from an old way of life.

He who would be abused himself, warns his followers of the consequences of abusing others and of using power or status over those who have none. Thus, he who would be stripped, tortured, ridiculed, wrongly imprisoned, and even had to carry his own cross to the place of execution, teaches his disciples that abuse of power in all its forms has no place in the Kingdom of God. The Creative Word who became a child in the womb of Mary knew what it was to give up ultimate power in order to bring liberation to those who only knew how to misuse that power.

Somewhere in the world today, children will be exploited and made to work rather than play; somewhere in the world today, children are being recruited and turned into child soldiers; somewhere in the world today, children are denied an education, especially girls; and all over the world today, children are being handed down a legacy of parents’ prejudice or false expectations, including how they ought to behave, what they ought to do, and even how they ought to look. As I think of those things I think of that wrist band that evangelical Christians often wear that says, “What would Jesus do?”

Let me end with a poem by Malcolm Guite on today’s Gospel passage titled, **‘Better to Enter Life Maimed.’**

How much we make of ‘wellness’, ‘health’ and ‘wholeness’;
The ideal body, the unblemished form,
How deeply we despise and hide our weakness
And worship all the world thinks strong and firm.
And how each facile photoshopped appearance
Haunts and accuses children as they grow
Until they pine for their own disappearance
And waste away and never tell their woe.

But you have never fallen for this idol,
You ‘had no form for beauty’, hurt and shamed,
A stumbling block, a mockery, a scandal,
You lived with the rejected and the maimed.
Don’t count me with the strong and tanned and thin,
Count me with the maimed, but count me in. ²

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

¹ Preached on Sunday, September 20, 2015 at 11:00 am

² From ‘Parable and Paradox,’ Page 41