

## PROPER 20, PENTECOST 17, YEAR B, SEPTEMBER 19, 2021

I have found, over the years, that the church has had an interesting relationship with children being in church for the actual service. Growing up, my home parish had a children's chapel and it was only when we reached the third grade that we were allowed in church with adults for regular Sunday worship. Every church I've been to claim that they want children to be a part of the service. But, God forbid, they start getting restless, cry, start talking, singing, or just generally doing things children do and congregants get upset that their worship is being disturbed and they want the children out of the church.

Most ministers have tons of stories – most of them funny - when it comes to children in church and I will relate just one. A couple used to bring their grandson to church whenever he was visiting. They usually sat in the back of the church in case they had to make a hasty retreat. James, liked to wander a little bit, but was always near his grandparents. One Sunday James stood in the aisle at the back of the church while I was preaching. He then turned his back to me, bent over and looked at me from between his legs. He stayed like that for quite awhile and I just about lost it laughing. It sometimes takes a child to put things in perspective and remind us not to take ourselves too seriously.

Children have a way of showing us all their emotions; delight, joy, happiness and when they're bored, hungry, sad, scared, or irritable, they let us know that, too. In today's gospel when Jesus welcomes a child in the midst of his disciples it seems to be a gentle, warm and loving gesture. On the face of it, that's what it appears to be but this gesture is far more radical than it looks. Jesus tells the disciples whoever welcomes this child not only welcomes him but also the one who sent him – God.

I've heard many people suggest that Jesus likens children to God because children are so innocent and so good. Perhaps. But the children I know are also feisty, clever, quick, fierce, generous, selfish, naughty, obedient, curious, bored, quiet, loud, challenging, funny, surprising, creative, destructive, solemn, and exhausting. I think Jesus knew as much when he described children as trustworthy representations of God.

So what can we really learn about God by welcoming children? How can children open us up to deeper, more authentic communion with the divine? What might children teach us about greatness?

I believe children show us that our imaginations are pathways to God. Did you ever watch children play with legos and build something out of their imaginations. Or give them a crayon or pencil and let them draw something that might look like a bunch of squiggles and shapes and they can weave an entire story around what they've drawn.

Jesus invited the disciples to imagine a world where death doesn't have the final word and where inexpressible suffering gives way to irrepressible joy. It's about resurrection not merely being a possibility, but a promise. But the disciples can't make the leap. They're bound by preconceived notions of who and what the Messiah must be, and they lack the imagination to envision a world as revolutionary as the one Jesus holds out to them. Preconceived notions and what they've been taught hold their spiritual senses captive. *Welcome the child*, Jesus says and open your imaginations. Return to the capacity for wonder, newness, and strangeness you knew as a child.

Children teach us to risk hard questions on our way to God. Kids aren't afraid to ask awkward, challenging, and even impossible questions. They're naturally curious, they're not easily embarrassed by their ignorance, and they're willing to risk social

discomfort to get to the truth. If they don't understand something, they ask, and they persist in asking. In contrast, the disciples in this week's Gospel story miss an opportunity to draw closer to Jesus, because they're too afraid to ask hard questions. In telling them candidly about the suffering that lies in his future, Jesus offers his disciples the possibility of a deeper, more vulnerable-making intimacy with him. But they refuse the invitation, either because they don't have the courage to admit their ignorance, or because they can't bear to hear truths that might cause them pain. Perhaps they believe — as we so often do — that avoiding the uncomfortable stuff will save them. Whatever the case, their unwillingness to ask tough questions of themselves, of each other, and of Jesus limits their growth and their fellowship with God.

Children teach us to trust God's abundance. Young children generally expect that there's enough to go around. Enough time, enough hugs, enough attention, enough love. It doesn't occur to them to fear scarcity unless they're conditioned to do so; left to themselves, they assume plenitude.

In her memoir, *The Cloister Walk*, Kathleen Norris tells a beautiful story about Saint Thérèse of Lisieux. When Thérèse was four years old, she was shown a handful of colorful ribbons, and asked to choose one. Entranced, she simply responded, "I choose all." The disciples in this week's story don't believe that "all" is available in the kingdom of God. They don't understand Jesus's generosity, sufficiency, and abundance. Because they believe that what is available to them is meager and inadequate to start with, they quarrel for first place, first dibs, first prize. In response, Jesus points them to the non-striving, un-ambitious, open-hearted trust of a young child. As if to say: "Stop competing. Stop scrambling. There is enough. I am enough."

And finally, children teach us what divine power looks like. This, I think, is the most radical lesson of the four. A young child is the very picture of vulnerability. In some cultures, children are socially invisible. In others, they're legally unprotected. Here in the United States, 17.5% of all our children live in poverty and the numbers based on race and ethnicity are significantly higher with 71% of black, Hispanic and native American children living in poverty. According to UNICEF out of 38 advanced countries the US ranks 36<sup>th</sup> when it comes to child poverty. In all cultures, children are at the mercy of those who are older, bigger, and stronger than they are and we have a lot to learn about welcoming the child.

And yet this — this shocking portrait of powerlessness— is the portrait Jesus offers of God. In the divine economy, power and prestige grow as we consent to be vulnerable, to be invisible, to be low. We gain greatness not by muscling others out of our way, but by serving them, empathizing with them, and sacrificing ourselves for their well-being. Whatever human hierarchies and rankings we cling to, Jesus upends them all as he holds a tiny child in his arms. Do we want to see God? Do we really want to see God? Then look to the child abandoned in the alleyway. Look to the child wanting food and a better education. Look to the child who has been molested. Look to the child who is fleeing from war. Look to the least of these, and see the face of God.

One of the most central and amazing truths about Christianity is that God became a helpless human infant. In this week's Gospel story, Jesus underscores that stunning truth with another: *all* children represent God's heart, God's likeness, God's power. To welcome a child is to welcome the divine. To cultivate childlikeness is to cultivate godliness. To choose vulnerability is to be great in the kingdom of God. Amen.

