

## PROPER 20, PENTECOST 18, YEAR B, SEPTEMBER 22, 2024

I think it's fair to say that our society is obsessed with greatness. Hence the title GOAT – Greatest of All Times that is associated with artists, athletes, musicians and a host of other professions. However, we are not the only society that has ever been enamored with greatness. During Jesus' lifetime the Roman Emperor Augustus, was likewise obsessed with greatness. He wrote his own laudatory speech titled "what I did" which was then engraved on two pillars at the entrance of his mausoleum. As one historian phrased it, copies of this "relentlessly egocentric first-person narrative" were distributed throughout the empire just to make sure everyone knew about his greatness.

So, it's not surprising that today's Gospel talks about why greatness and things like rank, wealth, fame, power, title, privilege, and prestige, can be dangerous. Jesus is telling his disciples, who are arguing about greatness, that greatness isn't what they think it is. To make his point Jesus then takes a child and puts that child front and center to emphasize that the child is what real greatness is all about.

Now for over 70 years the church has had an interesting relationship with children being in church for the actual service. Growing up we were relegated to the children's chapel until we reached the third grade when we were allowed in church with adults for regular Sunday worship. Every church I've been associated with 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 because James liked to wander a little bit. One Sunday James stood in the aisle at the back of the church while I was preaching staring at me. 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, of course, I started 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 they let us know when they're bored, hungry, sad, scared, or irritable. When Jesus welcomes a child in the midst of his disciples, on the surface it seems to be a gentle, warm and loving gesture. 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. And in that welcome is true greatness.

I've heard many people suggest that Jesus is likening 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.

So, what can we really learn about God by welcoming children? How can children open us up to a deeper, more authentic relationship with God? 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 yet they can weave an entire story around what they've drawn.

Jesus invited the disciples to imagine a world where the poor, the downtrodden, the forgotten, the outcasts are raised up and are recognized for their worth and value. He asks them to imagine a world where death doesn't have the final word and resurrection is not merely a possibility, but a promise. But the disciples are caught up with their preconceived notions of who they think Jesus as the Messiah is so they lack the imagination to envision a world as revolutionary as the one Jesus holds out to them. Jesus says to us welcome the child and open our imaginations. Return to the capacity for wonder, newness, and inquisitiveness we knew as a child.

Children also teach us to risk hard questions. Kids aren't afraid to ask awkward, challenging, and even impossible questions. You know the inevitable why 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 if they don't like the answer they persist in asking.

In contrast, the disciples in this week's Gospel miss an opportunity to ask hard questions either because they don't have the courage to admit their ignorance, or because they can't bear to hear truths about Jesus' true ministry. Whatever the case, their unwillingness to ask tough questions of themselves, of each other, and of Jesus limits their understanding of Jesus and God. Do we limit ourselves by not asking the hard questions regarding our faith and our relationship with God?

Children also teach us to trust God's abundance. Young children generally expect that there's enough to go around - enough time, hugs, attention, even love. It doesn't occur to them to fear scarcity unless they're conditioned to do so because of their circumstances otherwise they assume plenitude. The disciples don't believe that "all" is available in the kingdom of God. They don't understand Jesus's generosity, and abundance because they believe that what is available to them is meager and inadequate. That's why they quarrel for first place, first dibs, first prize. In response, Jesus points them to the 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 God's power looks like. This, I think, is the most radical lesson. 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, 14% of all our children live in poverty and the numbers based on race and ethnicity are significantly higher with 56% of black, Hispanic and native American children are living in poverty. According to UNICEF out of 38 advanced countries the US ranks 36th 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 especially after it's born. Jesus is reinforcing the inherent value of children and other people who are most vulnerable, least seen, and unheard.

And yet this shocking portrait of powerlessness is the portrait Jesus offers of God and God's greatness. In God's kingdom 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 fleeing gun violence. 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.

Today we baptize Ramona Jean Ellis and in our baptismal covenant we firmly state that we promise to strive for justice and peace among all people and respect the dignity of every human being. This means we are called to transform the world not conform to it by breaking down racism, sexism, homophobia, religious and ethnic bigotry of all kinds. We are called to see Christ in those we meet and be Christ for them.

So, this morning let us look to Ramona to once again remind ourselves of who God is and remember that God became a helpless human infant to show us the vulnerability of greatness. Jesus underscores this stunning truth and tells us that all children represent God's heart, God's likeness, God's power. To welcome a child is to welcome God. To cultivate childlikeness is to cultivate godliness. To choose vulnerability is to be great in the kingdom of God. This is how God loves the world. This is how God loves us. This is the love God created us to choose and to live. So, let us welcome Ramona into God's loving embrace and see in her the radical welcoming face of our God. Amen