

Sermon for September 19, 2021
Proper 20b
The Rev. Canon Raymond Raney
Trinity on the Hill Episcopal Church
Los Alamos, New Mexico

Proverbs 31: 10-31
Psalm 1
James 3:13-4:3, 7-8a
Mark 9:30-37

In the Gospel today we see Jesus and his disciples traveling incognito through the lands on his way to visit the home of his family at Capernaum. He's trying to tell them what's coming – the “Son of Man” will be betrayed to the authorities and killed, and after three days he will rise again.

They just don't get it. In fact the disciples spent their time arguing about who was going to be the top dog. When Jesus confronts them, they know something's wrong because they won't even admit what they were arguing about. We want to grab them by the lapels: This man is telling you he's going to be betrayed; he's going to die; he's going to rise: “How can you be so selfish.”

Actually, that's a bit unfair: In the introduction to *The Man Born to Be King*, Anglican writer Dorothy L. Sayers writes that the disciples and everyone around them had absolutely no idea of who Jesus was.

“We judge their behaviour as though all of them — disciples, Pharisees, Romans, and men-in-the-street — had known with Whom they were dealing and what the meaning of all the events actually was. But they did not know. The disciples had only the foggiest inkling of it, and nobody else came anywhere near grasping what it was all about.”

It's easy to cast aspersions. And on that walk along the Galilee they argued among themselves.

Who here wants to be first of all?
Who here wants to be powerful?
Who here wants to be a leader?

The disciples may very well be ready to raise their hands, but then Jesus challenges them:

You want to be great? He asks: Really?

“Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.”

Huh? What?

In other words: “If You want to be on top, then you have to be on the bottom.”

Jesus is trying to teach them where his path will take him; what will be the inevitable cost of God’s vision of the Kingdom, and the trust he has in the will of his father.

Jesus is trying to teach them, and he sees it’s going in one ear and out the other. How can he teach them, and he decides. He doesn’t use charts and graphs or even a Powerpoint presentation. He chooses to illustrate his point with a symbol, a metaphor. Jesus goes outside and borrows someone’s child from the streets of Capernaum and brings the child into the discussion.

What is it with Jesus and Children?

In various places in the Gospels, Jesus brings children into the story to illustrate his message to the disciples:

Luke 18:16

“But Jesus called the children to him and said, “Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these.”

Luke 18:17

“Truly I tell you, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it.””

Matthew 18:10

“See that you do not despise one of these little ones. For I tell you that their angels in heaven always see the face of my Father in heaven.”

Matthew 18:6

“If anyone causes one of these little ones—those who believe in me—to stumble, it would be better for them to have a large millstone hung around their neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea.”

Matthew 18:14

“In the same way your Father in heaven is not willing that any of these little ones should perish.”

Why children?

In the world of Jesus time, children were powerless. They didn't count. They were the last and the least. Basically, children were the property of their fathers. As soon as they were old enough they were put to work.

But here we have Jesus picking up a child to make a point. And given the nature of children, the child probably was all hands, reaching for Jesus' beard, pulling at his hair, squirming all over.

And Jesus tells the disciples: "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me."

Why children?

On page 829 of the Prayer Book, there are two prayers.

The first is *For the Care of Children*

Almighty God, heavenly Father, you have blessed us with the joy and care of children: Give us calm strength and patient wisdom as we bring them up, that we may teach them to love whatever is just and true and good, following the example of our Savior Jesus Christ. *Amen.*

And the second is For Young Persons

God our Father, you see your children growing up in an unsteady and confusing world: Show them that your ways give more life than the ways of the world, and that following you is better than chasing after selfish goals. Help them to take failure, not as a measure of their worth, but as a chance for a new start. Give them strength to hold their faith in you, and to keep alive their joy in your creation; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*

In today's world, childhood is pictured as something of an idyllic existence. When I was growing up, especially in the summer when school was out, we were out the door after breakfast, showed up for lunch, and out the door till the call to dinner. Childhood for us was freedom. Today, the childhood my brother and sister and I experienced seems distant. Today, we would have been called "free range" children.

In a very real sense, this child, children, seem to represent not just an infant, a toddler, a child, but represents something more. It's almost as if the child represents a return to the innocence of Eden. As Jesus told Nicodemus in *The*

Chosen excerpt we viewed last week, to be born again of water and the spirit. The child represents new birth, a fresh start, a way of looking at the role of leadership – to be first you must start over, you must be transformed.

To lead, Jesus seems to be saying, you must have a child's purity, simplicity, fearlessness, and trust – like a child running full out into the arms of mom and dad – embrace the vision of the Kingdom – “even as I am making my way to death on the cross and life beyond. Trust God.”

The child represents new birth and the Holy Spirit fills us with the newness of life when we walk the way with Jesus and work to build the Kingdom for the generations yet to come.

During the past year and a half we have all been filled with fear, fear of disease, fear of exposure, fear of others, and fear for ourselves and our families.

To welcome the child is to open our hearts to the Holy Spirit. When we open our hearts we can cast off years of doubt and the cynicism that builds on the disappointments we experience from the actions of friends and families. When we open our hearts, we can be reborn.

The world can change. When the Spirit fills us with the child's joy we are freed from fear of what's ahead, and know this: with God's help, we can change, and we – each of us – all of us – can be renewed.

Let us pray.

O God, you made us in your own image and redeemed us through Jesus, your Son: Look with compassion on the whole human family; take away the arrogance and hatred that infects our hearts; break down the walls that separate us; unite us in bonds of love; and work through our struggle and confusion to accomplish your purposes on earth; that, in your good time, all nations and races may serve you in harmony around your heavenly throne; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.