

Sermon for September 22, 2024
Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost
Proper 20b
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Trinity on the Hill Episcopal Church
Los Alamos, New Mexico

Wisdom of Solomon 1:16-2:1, 12-22
Psalm 54
James 3: 13-4:3, 7-8a
Mark 9:30-37

In today's Gospel Jesus is teaching his disciples as they continue their walk through the Galilee, and telling them he's going to be killed. Of course, they do not want to hear it.

Their concern: "Who is the greatest among them?" Each of them is all puffed up with themselves just as most of us in our twenties were: full of ourselves and knowing more than anybody around us, especially our parents and teachers. And Jesus turns the question on its head.

"He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, 'Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.' Then he took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms, he said to them, 'Whoever welcomes one such a child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.'"

We mostly are in the middle of the pack. I don't think most of us think of ourselves as the greatest, but we also don't think of ourselves as the least. We're in the middle so what Jesus says can be deflected because we can think of ourselves as caring for others and looking out not to get too uppity and full of ourselves. But then Jesus brings a child into the mix and throws everything out of kilter. How do we act as servants to children?

Mothers probably more than Fathers, but Fathers know too, what it is to clean up the messes of our children and other peoples' children. Kids are easy to like – up to a certain age. Infants are just loveable. Remembering that we were all infants at one time or another is not easy.

Be it family or friends or those we have to deal with, we all grow up and pick up habits and behaviors that do not endear us to others or even those close to us. As we grow up we learn to be

persnickety, argumentative, sarcastic, demanding, you name it.
That's just part of growing up.
And then we disagree with each other
and that just adds to the issues that divide us –
whether it be brothers, sisters, aunts, uncles, mothers, fathers,
sons or daughters or friends dear and distant.

It's not easy to get along,
and church families are no different than other families and groups of friends. So how do we as a
family grow into the people God created us to be
and care for each other?

On a recent Saturday my wife and I had a resting afternoon.
We chose to stream a movie on the Hallmark Channel.
Unlike other channels where evil can win and the good do not triumph,
the benefit of the Hallmark Channel
is that you know that no matter the trials and tribulations,
the pain and the suffering, in the end the outcome will be happy,
and we'd shed tears along the way.
For me this is the glimpse of Eternity,
the final happy ending for us all that God promised through Jesus.

The film was called *November Christmas*.
It's the story of a family struggling to deal with the illness of their daughter, who is about seven or
eight.
She has leukemia and has suffered through months of chemotherapy.
When they return home they are welcomed back,
but do not share their plight with their neighbors in the small town.

“When will I get better?” the girl asks her parents, “By Halloween?”
They tell her that she might be better by Christmas,
silently believing she might be dead by Thanksgiving.

As the girl's condition does not improve,
her father goes to the farmer where they buy their vegetables
and asks for pumpkins, but it's only August.
No pumpkins will be ripe till October.
As she worsens, her father asks if he can pick out their Christmas tree?
Again, it is too early.

Shortly after the last request, the farmer has an insight,
her father is trying to move up the calendar to give his daughter the holidays, and he decides to act.
With the help of a friend whose son owns a farm a day's drive south,
he comes up with a truckload of pumpkins,
and secretly piles them on the family's porch.
The girl is delighted and the family throws a Halloween party
and the town turns out for the September pumpkin fest.

September passes and the girl grows weaker.

Her condition worsens,
and her doctors require her admittance to the hospital
for another round of chemo.
A month in the hospital weakens the girl's system
to the point she cannot undergo further treatment.
In November the doctors release her to send her home,
nothing left to do but wait for her to either improve or ...

As the family drives back into town in despair,
they pass homes lit for Christmas, and the town itself, every light, every shop, every roof lined with the
lights of Christmas.
The girl is overjoyed, and they discover their own home thoroughly lit
to the brightest of Christmas wishes.
The next morning it snows an early snow
and Christmas has come in November.

As with all Hallmark movies, the girl turns the corner,
bolstered by the love shown her and her family by the town,
she responds and heals.
The story turns to the girl grown into a woman.
She becomes a children's author to share the love her town
showed her and her family as they welcomed her a
nd the lives they all shared with each other.

We are called to care in this way, to go out of our way to care for others.
As adults we forget the love of the past.
Adults learn to be surly and off-putting.
It seems sometimes it's easier to be snippy and short.
Our kids grow up, our friends grow old, and we forget who they were before.

Here's a trick I learned a long time ago from a dear friend
who is with us no more.
Whenever I pray for someone – I picture the person as a child in a cradle, with eyes wide and accepting
and open to the love of the world,
and I pray for that child who has grown into someone older
so that I may remember who was and who is and who is to come.

The look in a child's eyes beholding the world is a wonder to see.
May we each remember the wonder we saw
when we opened our eyes and realized:
This is the world God has made,
and it is wondrous indeed!