

Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost; September 22, 2024
+ Mark 7:30-37 +
“Jesus Calls His Children to Welcome Children”

They went on from there and passed through Galilee. He did not want anyone to know this, because he was teaching his disciples. He told them, “The Son of Man is going to be betrayed into the hands of men, and they will kill him. But three days after he is killed, he will rise.”

But they did not understand the statement and were afraid to ask him about it.

They came to Capernaum. When he was in the house, he asked them, “What were you arguing about on the way?” But they remained silent, because on the way they had argued with one another about who was the greatest. Jesus sat down, called the Twelve, and said to them, “If anyone would be first, he will be the last of all the servant of all.” Then he took a little child and placed him in their midst. Taking the child in his arms, he said to them, “Whoever welcomes one of these little children in my name welcomes me. And whoever welcomes me, welcomes not just me but also him who sent me.”

As Jesus and his disciples pass through Galilee for the very last time, he keeps on teaching them. He teaches them clearly what is about to happen to him: **“The Son of Man is going to be betrayed into the hands of men, and they will kill him. But three days after he is killed, he will rise.”** If you think, “That sounds familiar,” you’re right! Jesus keeps on talking about this with his disciples throughout the four Gospels. Three times in Mark alone! He keeps bringing this up.

And meanwhile, the disciples keep not understanding. Instead of asking in order to gain understanding, they maneuver to maintain their own individual prestige and importance. They know Jesus is the Messiah, but they do not understand the Messiah’s mission. They know Jesus is headed to Jerusalem, the capital, and they know that the Messiah is and forever will be King. So what do they do? Instead of listening and understanding and asking for further explanation of already plain, straightforward language, they start jockeying. They begin riding their own individual horses to a top position in the cabinet of the Messiah King.

Three times in St. Mark’s Gospel Jesus says what will happen to him. And all three times the disciples respond by making it about their importance, their control and position. The way they do it this time is the equivalent of texting under the cafeteria table: keep it low so the teacher doesn’t know.

Three times Jesus makes his life about their life eternal, our life eternal. And three times they respond by making their lives about themselves. Jesus’ way demands all of himself in humble sacrifice. Their way proudly demands all sacrifice from the other.

Now they come to Capernaum for the last time. And we see Jesus’ response. He knows their hearts. You can’t hide your heart from Jesus. So, check your heart today. What does your way of living demand? Lowly sacrifice from yourself, all of yourself for others? Or proud control and power and service from others? Jesus checks his disciples’ hearts – not just the Twelve, but yours and mine, too.

And he knows what’s there. Nothing is hidden from him.

How many times are you willing to teach a thing to a person who does not understand? This time – after so many times – Jesus hugs a little child and holds the child in the middle of the Twelve. And this may need some explaining. In our culture, most people love to serve little children. In most families, they are

cared for in every detail, doted on, in some cases spoiled and idolized. Not in Israel, not during Jesus' ministry. Of course, parents and siblings loved their little children and cared for them. But that's where it ended. Children were not elevated; they were seen mostly as a necessary nuisance, weak and needy. And Jesus hugs someone like that. Here is Jesus' response to the pride of the Twelve, their need for position and control: **"Whoever welcomes one of these little children in my name welcomes me. And whoever welcomes me, welcomes not just me but him who sent me."**

This is the commitment, the call to discipleship that Jesus demands: Look low. Bend low. It is the commitment he calls his followers to show to him in the way they treat each other, because it's the commitment he shows us.

But within us and among us remains the tendency of the Twelve: to grab for power and control, to uphold our own status and prestige by riding past and climbing over each other. But to follow Christ is to show his commitment to serve others and put self below and behind.

That is true Christian humility. It is not aww, shucks, I'm no good. There was an Irish rowing team that won gold on the Sienne this summer. In the post-medal ceremony interview, one of the rowers gave a ridiculous response when asked the classic question, "How does it feel to win a gold medal?" He said, "It's okay, there are worse days, but I wouldn't go around talking about it." That's not humility, that's a waste of status and position. Humility in Christ would recognize the high position a gold medal brings you – the sponsorships, the prestige – and then ask "How can use this for someone who's not in my position?" Maybe I could open a rowing school for kids."

None of us are Irish gold medal rowers, so that exact example may not be too practical. But the point that applies is this: in the eyes of the world, you are higher than many. You are, in many relationships, the adult dealing with the child in Jesus' embrace – maybe a child literally or figuratively, anyone looked on as low by the world. But even though you are above that person in the world's eyes, you willingly place yourself beneath and behind to serve them.

This is the humility of Christ, who was determined to be betrayed into the hands of men, be killed, and after three days, to rise. He was and still is the Son of God. That never changed. He never stopped being God, infinitely higher above every other human. But from that height, he looked low, to a world of sinners needing salvation, and he bent low – never ceasing to be God! – he bent low and saved God's children by his holy death and resurrection. And he will welcome God's children, in his own name, to his side in heaven.

But still, it was only service that God himself could offer. To live a holy life, he had to remain God. To sacrifice himself once for all the sin of the whole world – only God could do that. Do you see? He never stopped being God. He was God using everything in his power, everything in his control, all that he was, to serve others ahead of self.

You do not need to abandon who you are. God has given you gifts and placed you in a position above some, beneath others. Only abandon your pride, your need to control and rule, and use who you are and what you have for others ahead of yourself: **"If anyone wants to be first, he will be the last of all and the servant of all."**

In the time and place Jesus spoke those words, children were at the end of the line of importance, control, and prestige. To serve all, to be called first in the kingdom of God, you have to serve the child Jesus hugs

and everyone between you and the end of the line. You must welcome people at the end of the line and know that when you do, you welcome Jesus and the Father who sent him.

It is a shocking way that Jesus ends his message. It may seem shocking, because many of us have heard the words many times before. But slow down and think this through: when you welcome a child in Jesus name, you welcome him and the Father who sent him. Why?

What did the Father see when he looked at Adam and Eve with that fruit in their hands? What did he see when he planned our salvation from eternity? What did the Son see when accepted the mission of his Father to come and save? Children. Helpless. Vulnerable. Lost without help. Every last one of us, from Adam and Eve all the way down. In his eyes, there was no difference in our status. All lost, all helpless and doomed little children, without his help.

And what was in the heart of the Father who promised a Savior in the Garden of Eden? What was in the Father's heart when he sent his only Son to die for us? What was in the heart of Jesus when he knelt in the Garden of Gethsemane before dying for our sins? Loving welcome for us children. Loving welcome back into their arms, sins forgiven. Loving welcome into their arms forever in heaven.

In all of that, the Father never stopped being God. The Son never ceased being divine; he used who he was to serve and save. He only let go of his prestige and power. He lowered himself and went to the back of the line, the bottom of the ladder, to welcome children.

So we welcome children in Jesus' name. This does not require us to aw shucks our way through life, or to forget the skills and status God has blessed us with. It does require us to live in Jesus' name, the one who remained God and at the same time lowered himself to serve and save lost children, whom he now welcomes into his kingdom.

This makes Christ's call to discipleship – to live in his humility – challenging and time-consuming and thought-provoking and energy-draining. I must look for the children around me – literal and figurative – anyone low in the eyes of the world, and, without pride and need for power, use who God has made me and what God has given me to welcome them in Jesus' name: because I know Jesus has welcomed a little child like me.

We need to look outside ourselves with open eyes, hearts alive in Jesus' name, hearts that seek the back of the line, where the children are. We need to hug these people like Jesus. We need to take them in our arms, in whatever sense they need to be held. We need to look them in the eye, sit with them, listen to them, and find out what else they need. And then use everything we are and have to serve them.

This is the heart of Christ, who insisted on being betrayed, handed over, suffering, dying, and rising to welcome us children in to his arms. This is the heart of Christ, he used everything he was and had to welcome us little children. And this is the heart he calls us to show. In Jesus' name, welcome the children, and welcome Jesus and his Father at the same time. For you are the child he served and welcomes. Amen.