

Proper 20 B 2021
Mark 9: 30-37

You know more than you think you do. At first, I thought this was a passage from scripture or from a priests' manual, until I realized it was the first line of Dr. Spock's manual on raising children. With all the time I have spent with children, especially my own, I remember distinctly the first time I had experience with day-care. It was in the days before I was ordained, and what I remember most was the visual chaos of seeing the room for the first time and I wish I had a recording of the experience. Knowing that things are likely quite different in today's climate, walking in there for the first time was an education in how we think about small children in our time and place. They were scattered throughout the room, on the floor and in bouncy seats (I assume they still have those), some in full-throated cry and others with their fists in their mouths, many dressed in bibs and spotless outfits that I knew would look quite different at the end of the day. More interesting to me were the parents, arriving in business suits with long lists of what little Brittany would prefer to eat that day, what her usual naptime was and that she would prefer to be carried until she dozed off, thank you very much.

It represents such a contrast with the first-century attitudes toward children that it is hard to make sense of what Jesus says about them, the "little ones," with the recording of my own experience playing in the background. They were as close to non-people as anyone could find, and were expected to be with their mothers, not tugging at the robes of those who were disputing about greatness. They were firmly in the background and, barring serious illness, would develop into real people one day, but until then they could be ignored. First-century helicopter parents were unknown; if you don't believe me, best of luck finding a Dr. Spock manual from early antiquity.

But this very attitude gives Jesus a chance to play with the system and the attitudes he is confronting. He has been making another of his unnerving passion predictions, ones the disciples can't understand, and their status game is the only way they can think to stave off the anxiety. Knowing that he is dealing with fear and exclusion among those closest to him, he grabs one of these children, one that had apparently gotten away, places him in the midst of them and, looking intently at each of the disciples, says, "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me." This is also a scene that would have had a fair amount of humor in it: twelve grown men staring down at a kid seated on their teacher's lap, the child's face coated with dirt and dressed in something that the day-care workers I know would pick up with tongs, and all of them being told that this should be their model for ministry. But that is precisely the point: Jesus is putting himself in the place of this grubby-looking child, about as far away from a Ralph Lauren ad as you could imagine and is saying that whoever welcomes him welcomes me. If you are interested in making deals about who is on top, there is nothing more disheartening than that. But that is what the kingdom is founded on: it is not the adorable, fresh-faced toddler that we could all coo over, but the kid all of us could ignore, that is folded in his arms. We are to treat him as the most precious thing in the world, and in doing that, we are honoring the presence of the living God.

If you really want to learn about belovedness, try spending some time alone with a small child, pulling blocks out of his mouth, playing games whose rules change about every ten seconds or the half-hour bathroom breaks. They care nothing about your agenda, and they are less than no help when the car breaks down or the lights go out. What they can give you is an idea of what your plans, your own greatness, might mean, especially when there is no one around to keep score. To spend a morning on the floor with a small child with nothing but blocks or dolls is a crash-course in what our idea of greatness is really worth.

But Jesus is talking about something deeper here and it has to do with the irrelevance of social standing in the calculus of the kingdom. Those who are excluded are the ones most valued, not full of

bitter envy or selfish ambition, as James puts it, the kind we encounter all too frequently and puts us at odds with our best selves. We know this from our own responses when our sisters and brothers are suffering; no one asks for credentials when people are displaced because of diseases that no one understands very well. The images instead are of people willing to give themselves regardless of the circumstances. Knowing this, the passion prediction that we have just heard is about giving oneself on behalf of a world where there are no such distinctions. The silence of the disciples, and our own, are then about whether we can accept such a world, whether our radical welcome extends to those who can do nothing for our own social standing but are priceless in what they offer in terms of the kingdom.

To see the world in this upside-down way is especially instructive for what it says about us, particularly for anyone who has spent some time on a playground with a bunch of kids. Yes, they can be playful and carefree, teach us how to let go of our dreadful seriousness and live outside of a world of mortgages and production quotas. But they can also be cruel and exclusive, establish their own pecking orders and generally behave like little children. I'm sure we all know people like that: there are times when I am more like that than I would care to admit. But it is these that Jesus takes in his arms and asks these upwardly mobile disciples to welcome them. He is challenging us to be that accepting, not just of children but of all the little ones, the ones who hang-out at the wrong places, say the wrong things, and generally have little to offer but themselves. It is on these people that Jesus is trying to build a kingdom.

It's not such a struggle for those of us who aren't striving for greatness, but my guess is that most of us are trying to see it in whatever we can offer the world. All of it is wonderful and valuable. But Jesus is asking us to look down at these wonderful people who depend on the good opinion we have of ourselves and focus our lives on the smallest people we see every day, to remind ourselves that the first in the kingdom may be the smallest of all. And that is something that we all need to hear, because we are all little ones at our best, not in our status games but in the kingdom we all learn to embrace.