

Sermon (Printable) by Pastor Molly Doreza
Based on Mark 9:30-50

As we read this gospel today, it's important to remember that it is a continuation of last week's gospel (Mark 30-37). In that text, Jesus puts a little child in front of his disciples – signifying that God's children, or “the vulnerable,” should be the focus of our ministry and mission.

Rolf Jacobsen, in the Working Preacher Blog “*Brainwave*,” reminds us that, in today's setting, “Jesus has not yet put the child down.” In other words, the child is still the focus of the situation and of Jesus' teaching.

Holding this in mind - while the child is still sitting on Jesus' lap - the disciple, John, brings up a controversial subject: who, exactly gets to minister to this child? John wonders: is *any* ministry legit, or does it have to be your specific followers?

Jesus skirts the ecumenical, ecclesiological, controversial question and (once again) diverts the attention back to the child.

It's really simple, at least to Jesus: A cup of cool water, given to this child, *is* following him. On the other hand, if you prevent aid to this child, you aren't following him and, worse, a great stumbling block is hung around your neck.

We shudder when Jesus discusses the consequences of not helping the child on his lap. It's pretty graphic imagery and we might start this part of the text with a disclaimer you often see on Netflix: “the following images might be disturbing to some people. Viewer discretion advised.”

Jesus doesn't mince words: his followers need to dismember any part of them, or their churches, which gets in the way of ministry to the children among us. He goes on to describe the “hell” that we are thrown into when we don't.

In the Hebrew Bible, “Hell,” or *Gehenna*, was initially a place where some of the kings of Judah sacrificed their children by fire. (Jeremiah 7:31-19:2)

(Remember, Jesus is describing all these things with a little child on his lap. And at this point anyone watching and listening has probably forgotten, altogether, any of the ecumenical questions they came with.)

You really have to love Jesus; he always cuts to the chase: last week, by yanking the child in front of us, and this week by placing the child he is *still* holding against the background of child sacrifice.

The message last week was that ministry's main and urgent purpose is to serve the child, the vulnerable "little ones" among us. Today, Jesus reminds us of what happens when we don't: we join a "living hell."

Most of us have given up on hell as a fiery furnace, and so we are less threatened by the consequences of being thrown into it. That doesn't mean there isn't a "hell on earth" which is every bit as dangerous and consuming as ugly Gehenna.

If we circle back to our first reading today, we hear of the distrust, unquenchable craving of Israel. Their lament is this: "if only. . ." Their "living hell" is the despair of living in the past. Sounds a lot like the church today, doesn't it?

"If only we had the numbers of people in worship we once had!"

"If only we had a Sunday School"

"If only we had the energy we used to have!"

So, like a good pastor, when she sees her congregation(s) suffering, Moses prays to God. She is ready to quit. . .and many of us good pastors, honestly, are ready to quit too.

And together, we continue to gather our leadership and wonder what God is up to, if anything.

Meanwhile. . .there are people out there who are ministering to children. They are not "us," but somehow, they've heard God's call to serve the "children," the vulnerable among us. While we wrangle about how to "do church" – and are weighted down by the millstone of nostalgia, we are worried that God might be working outside of our tribal walls. While our own drinking fountains have dried up, we still see ourselves as "competitors" with others whose fountains are flowing.

I certainly don't want to overlook the real and important ministries of our churches and the ELCA. In them, we *are* holding the child on our laps. The ELCA has fantastic programs for disaster and hunger relief, partnerships with developing

countries in Africa and central America. My sermon today isn't a diatribe against our church, here or nationwide.

Instead, it's a reminder to (as one pastor said) to "let the main thing be the main thing." To not put the child down. . .ever. To not be distracted by any of the "hells" which allure. To not be seduced by an institutional exclusivism – or a need for our own well-being and prosperity which prevents us from working with others, for the sake of the "little ones" out there.

In the next weeks, you will be hearing about The Greater Milwaukee Synod's 2.3-million-dollar mission appeal. "Equipping the Saints for the Work of Ministry" (Ephesian 4:12) is an appeal to congregations to strengthen their ministries , challenging us to think beyond our nostalgic boxes and join in new creative and collaborative (non-competitive) ways to serve the children, the vulnerable, in front of us.

I hope this appeal will stimulate us to move beyond the restraints we put on ourselves to be Jesus' witness in the world - and a way to help us not put down the child on Jesus' (and our) laps. Amen.

Pastor Molly Doreza