

For Each Child That's Born
Mark 9:30-37; 10:13-16
Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost, (Sept. 22) 2024
Kyle Childress

When times are urgent, slow down.

-Bayo Akomalafe

You've heard me say many times that Mark is the most fast moving, action oriented of the four Gospels. Jesus is always on the move, and it is no accident that Mark's most characteristic word is "immediately." They're always on the road, on the journey, on the Way, and if we, if the disciples want to know what Jesus is up to, then we have to stay up with him.

Here in Mark chapters 9 and 10 there is a lot going on. The disciples are checking their phones as they're walking and they're walking fast. What's next on the schedule? How late will they be? Peter, the Chief of Staff, says, "Andrew, call Capernaum and tell them we're running late. Jesus keeps getting distracted by healing someone not on the appointment list. Oh, and, Hey, James! No, not you James Zebedee! You! James Alphaeus, did you call ahead for the burgers? Okay, good! Get Thaddaeus and go and pick them up. We need to eat on the run. I know, I know we could get Jesus to create loaves and fishes and feed us, but he takes too long. He's always teaching when he does that. ... Yes, get some money from Judas or Matthew, they're in charge of finances... But remember, no goofing off. We're in a hurry and running behind. The Chief Pharisee in Capernaum has lined up a meeting with key influencers and we can't miss this one, again!"

One of the disciples, maybe it was young John, asked Simon Peter, “Pete what’s going on with Jesus? We go up on the mountain top and see him glow in the dark and stand there with none other than Moses and Elijah, and then a cloud covers everything, and we hear a voice that shook us to our bones, telling us to listen to everything Jesus says. I mean, this is a super-big-deal-hand-of-God kind of moment and we’re all ready to go out and smite the Amalekites and the Romans, but instead, it seems all he can talk about is taking up crosses and how his Way, is going to be costly. Meanwhile, some of us have been arguing about what positions we’ll get in the new administration Jesus sets up. I want Secretary of Defense and James wants Director of Homeland Security, but Simon the Zealot has some old grudges he wants settled and he wants one of these same positions, too. We tried to talk him into the Justice Dept., but he wants control of the nuke codes. We all want to kick some serious Roman rear-ends when we get power. I mean, we’re going to spend a lot of time putting people in jail, crucifying a few, and cleaning up this Roman mess. Matthew is angling for Secretary of Treasury and Bartholomew wants the State Dept.”

“I don’t know, John, what Jesus wants,” Peter says. “He doesn’t make sense to me. We’re building a movement here in Galilee, where we have a solid power base, and soon we’ll have enough power to take over some town councils and school boards. After that, we can move on Jerusalem. Judas whispered to me, that he has contacts in Jerusalem who are already making the right phone calls, using some impressive new social media platforms, raising money and having lunch meetings with powerful people. I think we’re on the way to seizing control.... Heh, come on! Jesus is stopping to talk to children again! I thought you and James and Simon the Zealot had instructions to shew children and beggars away. Keep the

women away, too! They slow us down. We're going to be so late! And there is too much to do! Too little time! We've got to move!"

Mark says that when they got to Capernaum, Jesus slows it down. They get to a house and Jesus asks, "Peter, what were you and the boys arguing about on the Way?" When he asks that all the disciples goes silent. Jesus knew what they were arguing and talking about. Meanwhile, people are everywhere, bringing in casseroles, fish tacos, more bread. Kids are running in and out and playing. Someone yells, "You kids either come in or stay out but stop slamming the door." One of the children comes and sits on Jesus' knee. Jesus says, "You fellows need to take a deep breath and listen to me." He puts the child in front of them and says, "The Way of the Kindom is not about power. It's not about domination and control. You see this precious child? She is our standard on how we do things. We are a community that cares for the least of these and where we live there is no one more least than children. Instead of domination and control, instead of hierarchy and exclusion, and power our life together is to receive these little ones and help them into their future."

Mark tells us one more chapter over in ten, when Jesus and the twelve were over in Judea, across the Jordan, people were bringing children to Jesus for him to bless them and the disciples were being rude and acting as obstacles to the children. In the original "come to Jesus meeting," Jesus jumped their case, sternly and directly, "Let the little children come to me. Do not stop them! For the kindom of God belongs to them. If you are an obstacle to the children, you are an obstacle to God's Way, the kindom of God! Do you hear me!? If you are not good caregivers for children, then you are going to hell and you deserve it!"

So, if Jesus says that caring for children is to be our standard, what might that mean for us? And I don't think that means we're supposed to get oozy and sentimental, for I certainly do not believe Jesus was being oozy and sentimental. I think Jesus is challenging us and challenging us clearly. What might it mean for our standard for economics and politics to be how those policies treat children? How do our labor policies and workplace policies treat parents and caregivers who are employees and workers? How we do pay them and how do provide their healthcare and provide healthcare for their children? What about how we care for this earth? What kind of world are we leaving for the children and grandchildren and beyond?

Our American paradigm tends to be men of power and wealth, warriors, and wealthy businessmen, who exploit, dominate, and control, all in the interest of making a profit as quickly as possible, gaining control, or keeping control as speedily as possible.

Jesus calls us to a different paradigm.

The King James Version Bible calls it the kingdom of God. Often, I call it the "Way" with the "W" capitalized, indicating like Mark often does, that what God is about and who God in Christ is, is known on the move, not statically. Sometimes I'll call it the reign of God or the Great Commonwealth of God indicating that it is for the common good and common-wealth and health of all, including the Earth and all its creatures. Martin Luther King, Jr. and John Lewis used to talk about the Beloved Community.

Today, I'm using a term that is returning in popularity that I originally heard from Mennonites: the kindom of God. It's about *kinship* as opposed to *kingship*. I've also learned this from a feminist ethic of care (see Virginia Held, *The Ethics of*

Care: Personal, Political, and Global, pp. 10-14, 47), in which our paradigms are not power and patriarchy but caring and tending. Instead of the central questions being about competition and violence and profit, we ask who cared for you and for whom do you care, and how do we sustain conditions that allow care to flourish? We are to care for children, care for the elderly, we care for the ill and infirm, and care for all God's Creation. Therefore, we are able to say to one another, as Jesus teaches here in these readings today, "Thank you for your service."

My old friend, Steve Long, who teaches theology at SMU's Perkins School of Theology, said that years ago when he was teaching at Marquette Univ. in Milwaukee, he used to take mostly Catholic students to stay with Protestant households in Northern Ireland while he was teaching a class on "Violence, Forgiveness, and Reconciliation." He says that the students visited a Catholic-Protestant daycare and asked the women how they came together in the midst of what was called "the troubles, and the women said, "Babies still need to be cared for; their diapers still need changing." Steve asks what if we asked candidates for political office, CEO's and leaders, "Have you ever changed diapers?" What if that was a criteria for positions of leadership?

Changing diapers and the kingdom of God are all about relationships, community, and learning to be family. I said last month in my reflections on being the pastor here for 35 years that it's about tending.

I've been an ordained pastor for 44 years and all those years, I have understood the church to be an extended family. What singer/songwriter Darrell Adams calls "the family of God." God calls you and me here to make a family and at the same time, this family makes us.

This brings us back to the kinship of God. In Christ, our salvation is being adopted into the family of God. The Apostle Paul said to the church in Rome, “but you have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, “Abba! Father!” It is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ ... (Romans 8:15-16).

All that to say, God’s kindom is full of all sorts of people who have been adopted into God’s family: short, tall, big, and little, young, and old, gay, and straight and transgender, Black, Brown, and White. And here in this family, God’s Spirit is at work growing us, nurturing us, and transforming us into a people who embody the love and Way of Jesus in this hard world.

Here, in this family by God’s grace, God is making us. Our standard is our children and the children around us and in this town and in this world. These days, we are acutely aware of the anxiety of welcoming children into a world of climate change, cascading crises, climate refugees and immigration (looking for a safe place for their children!), economic turmoil and political instability, violence, White Nationalism which seeks to protect children but only White, biological children, privatizing everything especially our public schools and controlling what we can and cannot read, with the state dictating how our children are to pray, and which parts of the Bible must be read and which parts are off-limits.

If our children are the standard for the kinship of God, we are called to tend our children, to raise them according to the Way of Christ, which usually means contrary to much that goes on around us. Therefore, we are constantly asking: (1) How do we make our children? And (2) How do our children make us?

The late and great John Lewis, used to say that in the Beloved Community that we are to “live as if.” We are to live as if the Beloved Community is already

here. Lewis wrote, “You live as you’re already there, that you’re already in that community, part of that sense of one family, one house. If you visualize it, if you can even have faith that it’s there, for you it is already there.”

That’s the church. As a family of God, together we start living the Beloved Community, the kinship of God now. And we raise our children to live now, what we pray and believe will someday be true for all people. At the same time, our children are training us to embody this kinship, rather than living the old way of domination and power.

Together we learn to seek the truth, see the truth, and speak the truth. That means being honest about living into a changing earth. But it also means being honest that when we face a crisis, recognizing that God is also part of the crisis, which means there are going to be surprises and grace that we did not anticipate. It means that in every crisis there is the opportunity for change, and inside every emergency is the word emerge.

Lydia Wylie-Kellerman who writes about raising children in the cascading crises of climate change, says that in our urgent work in front of us, one of the most important things our children teach, and we need to heed is to slow down.

She says, “So much of the culture that capitalism has created demands we speed up, Work faster. Shop faster. Scroll faster. Produce faster. Everything that is destroying the climate is moving too fast.

Let me add that the French philosopher Paul Virilio, who died in 2018, said that the essence of modern lives was speed, and speed is related to violence and power. He said that we are habituated into seeing violence as the fastest way to power.

So perhaps, in order to be part of the kinship of God, we need to start by simply slowing down.

West Nigerian philosopher Dr. Bayo Akomalafe says, “To slow down in times of crisis—times that in so many ways require action on all fronts—can seem counterintuitive. We are constantly met with pressures to *achieve* more, *act* faster and *be* better.” “Urgent times,” he urges, “call for quiet, for rest and respite. Instead of ramping up, we must surrender, and wait to witness the transformative potential of stillness.”

I’ve been here as your pastor for thirty-five years and one of the things I’ve learned, and continue to learn, is that some things take time and cannot be rushed. It takes time to know God. It takes time to be the family of God and we never grow in a straight line, but we grow in Christ in fits and starts, a step forward and two steps backwards and then forward again. We get weary, we get angry, we get on each other’s nerves, and we get hurt and hurt others. So, we slow down and do the careful, tending work of seeking forgiveness and granting forgiveness and reconciling. We slow down to get to know one another, and we move slow to allow ourselves to grieve. Slowing down allows us to notice and tend to the sacred in each other and in God’s beautiful world. In a hurry we are likely to miss butterflies and daffodils, caterpillars and burning bushes. We slow down to resist the speed of violence and the violence of speed, and so we can honor the way of love. We go slow to plant tomatoes and go slow to make protest signs. We go slow to let go and slow down enough to discover the new.

When Callie was about 3 or 4, I would pick her up from daycare about noon and we customarily would go to Taco Bell. That was her favorite place. The routine rarely varied. We would order and find a booth. Callie would stand in the

booth and talk while I ate. In a few minutes I was done, and she had only taken a bite or two. I was ready to go to the next thing while she was barely getting started on telling me about her day. I would urge her to eat, and she would pause long enough to take a bite and then go back to talking, while I sat impatiently listening while also looking at my watch. Our lunches together made me change my speed settings. I learned to be patient and let her be. Sometimes we go slow so our children have the time to be children. And we go slow so we have the time to be human.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One true God,
Mother of us all. Amen.