

First Presbyterian Church  
Charlotte, NC  
September 23, 2012  
Rev. Pendleton B. Peery

## **Let the Children Come**

Mark 9:30-37

They went on from there and passed through Galilee.

He did not want anyone to know it; for he was teaching his disciples, saying to them, 'The Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him, and three days after being killed, he will rise again.'

But they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him.

Then they came to Capernaum; and when he was in the house he asked them, 'What were you arguing about on the way?' But they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another about who was the greatest.

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 child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me.'

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When I was coming up in the church, there were a number of people who nurtured me into a love for and the knowledge of God.

I was baptized as an infant – and I am not sure who it was that sat in the congregation that day and promised to be my church family, but I have these memories of people – church people – who cared for me and taught me Sunday school and confirmation class, who took me to Montreat and the Camp Grier, who were patient with me as I asked questions about the faith and who treated me as if I mattered; who took me seriously for who I was as a child or a teenager.

One of those people was a woman named Jocelyn Hill who was the Director of Christian Education at the church of my childhood. Even after we moved from that church, Jocelyn would come to our house every Christmas for dinner. She would

take interest in hearing about my life. When talk at the table turned to politics or religion Jocelyn did not only have that conversation with the adults, she was always quick to ask me what I thought.

Jocelyn was able to have Christmas dinner with my family all those years because she did not have children. Yet not having children did not prevent her from understanding the value of a child. Of that, I am certain.

Jesus didn't have any children.

As far as we know, Jesus never had the experience of changing a diaper, or rocking a baby to sleep, or spending significant parts of the night awake with a baby that would not sleep.

Jesus never felt the magic of hearing a child call him 'daddy.'

But he still saw the value of children.  
And in ancient Palestine, that was no small thing.

That Jesus would recognize a little child seems like an insignificant detail to us, but to a first century hearer of this scripture it would be a major statement. To understand the difference between Jesus' time and our own, consider the store "Babies R Us."

You walk in, to be greeted by happy, uniformed people who are entirely too eager to see you.

The store is actually a warehouse.

The shelves reach toward the ceiling.

Merchandise is divided into color-coded categories: more categories than are imaginable.

Diaper-wipe cases? Would you like heated or not heated?

Developmentally appropriate toys? Which month is your child, specifically?

Convertible cribs that conform to the most stringent of safety standards? Our loan officer will be right with you...

Nursing paraphernalia? I don't know about that. I don't go on that aisle...

Amy Chua wrote a book last year called The Battle Hymn of The Tiger Mother that caught a lot of attention and drew a lot of ire. In it, she offered a searing critique of the way the Western world coddles our children. You don't have to agree with Chau's critique to see that – in many ways – providing for (obsessing about?) the needs and safety and emotional well being of our children has become normative for us as a culture.

In Jesus' time, nothing could be farther from the truth.

In an ancient agrarian economy, not only were children not coddled, they were hardly thought of as people. A child was seen as the least productive member of society, not as the apple of mom or dad's eye.

The place for a child was out of sight – with the women – certainly not among a rabbi and his disciples.

The set-up was perfect for Jesus.

His disciples had just been arguing, you see; worrying about who was the greatest – about who would be the apple of Jesus' eye. Much like many modern day disciples, they thought that following Jesus was about the reward; about the glory. Why else would they subject themselves to this thankless kind of life?

Bless their hearts. When he learned what they were arguing about, Jesus called them together. Then he sat down. That meant business. In the Jewish tradition, rabbis sit down to teach. The lesson that day was about being great.

I am paraphrasing here, but it went something like this:

You want to be great? Then give yourselves away. Lose yourself in the service to world.

You want to be first? Then be last. Park your self-interest in the back seat.

You want to follow me? Then serve those who reflect the face of God; not the ones who are easy to serve; but the ones who are difficult. Not the ones who need just a little bit of help; but the ones who need a lot.

And at that moment, Jesus spotted a child.

Now there are people – smart people – who comment about this passage and suggest that Jesus uses this unnamed child as an object lesson for his disciples (and for future disciples). The point, they say, is what the child represents: people who are vulnerable, voiceless, without honor. These are the kinds of people to which the church should be paying attention.

Of course, that is true. But before we rush our thoughts into broad categories, I think it is important that we focus on the child at hand.

Jesus doesn't just point to this child as if she were exhibit A on a whiteboard; he gathers her in his arms and welcomes her as the one for whom he has come to serve.

We often think of this scene as a Hallmark card – Jesus, fair-haired and smiling, holding a sweet little child. In reality, if the camera zoomed out a little bit, we would see the disciples staring at Jesus, looking horrified by what he suggests.

This is how we are to be great? By serving those who cannot even help themselves; who have nothing to contribute to society?

It was not the kind of lesson the disciples expected; nor one they wanted to hear.

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The great 20<sup>th</sup> century theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer said that “the test of the morality of a society is what it does for its children.”<sup>1</sup> In as much as our culture has created industry and expectation for the Cadillac-treatment of some children, we also live in world where children are hungry, under-educated, and afraid.

To be sure, there are people in this room who know some of these children – we’ve seen them on mission trips to Mexico and to Haiti...but also in the shadow of our steeple.

More than 21% of children in Mecklenburg County below the poverty line. Last year in our county there were more than 13,000 reports of child abuse.<sup>2</sup> Two years ago more than 2,000 children under the age of 18 were arrested for committing a violent crime.<sup>3</sup> In 2011, 33% of North Carolina public school students failed to pass the end of year reading and math basic proficiency exam.<sup>4</sup>

There are lots of reasons for these statistics – more reasons than be addressed in a sermon. But I would suggest to you that one reason why these statistics continue to stain the morality of our society is because we are just as caught up in self-interest and self-glorification as Jesus’ disciples were along the road. The voices of children – most especially children who are not our own – who are too often the tragedy of bad policies, bad parenting, or a combination of both are not easily heard over the noise of a world that values what is rewarded over what is right.

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One of the best parts about coming to a new church is the chance to hear and celebrate the stories of faithfulness from the past. Two of those stories that I have heard so far demonstrate the commitment of our church to be both a place that welcomes children and a center-city voice that advocates for children.

No doubt you know that our Child Development Center had its genesis in a faithful response to the needs of the city’s children. In the spring of 1947, Senior Minister

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<sup>1</sup> I am grateful to the Rev. Jarrett McLaughlin (associate pastor at the Village Presbyterian Church and a member of my preaching cohort, The Well) for his 2009 paper on this text.

<sup>2</sup> With thanks to member Sarah Shifflet who works at the Council For Children’s Rights (these statistics are a part of her research).

<sup>3</sup> North Carolina Department of Justice/State Bureau of Investigation (report, July 2011).

<sup>4</sup> NCReportcards.org (2011)

Dr. Charlie Kramer mobilized this congregation to create a space for the children of working families to learn, be nurtured in the faith, and become a part of the church community rather than walk aimlessly in the streets.

You may have heard that this past summer on their trip to Mexico, 14 of our outgoing high school seniors met a young man in the village where they served who had graduated as valedictorian of his class but did not have the means to attend college. In an act of faith and discipleship, our seniors decided to each pledge \$10/month for the next four years to make college possible.

Wonderful stories about wonderful acts of faith.

And Christ's call still extends to us.

We have more work to do.

There are still children in our world – indeed right down the street – our own and those of another who are desperate for someone who will hear their voices and respond to their needs:

For a fair shot at life.

For a safe place to live.

For access to a good education.

For a place to hear the good news that they are claimed and loved by Jesus Christ.

Whether they are receiving their Bibles as third graders, or wiggling next to us in the pew; whether they are sitting at our supper table on Wednesday night or going to one of our two schools during the week; whether they are in Westerly Hills or in southeast Charlotte...

Let the little children come!

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