**“Bright Youth and Snow-Crowned Age”**

October 20, 2024 Text: Mark 9:30-37

Reed Baer West Parish of Barnstable

Introduction to Scripture

Our reading for today comes from the first gospel, Mark. Jesus has been teaching and preaching and healing, and now, as he prepares to turn towards Jerusalem, he calls his disciples aside for a private teaching moment.

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I think one of our challenges as we consider this tender, iconic scene, where Jesus welcomes the little children, is that we find it so unsurprising.

As one of our popular hymns goes, “What a Friend We Have in Jesus”, so *of course* it is no surprise to us that Jesus cradles the little one in his arms, *of course* Jesus demonstrates God’s faithful, inclusive love by using a child as an example. Such a sweet scene, we think, showing those tough, rugged men – his disciples – that at heart Jesus is just a gentle puppy dog, and they should be as well.

Except, of course, that is not what Jesus is about here.

You see, we need to recognize that children were not viewed, in the time of Jesus, the way we view children today. Today, we value our children above all; we continually put children first. It is so ingrained in us, in our culture, that we don’t even recognize it often. And this has become more and more the case even over my lifetime.

One example: when I was a child, at dinner time my mother made one meal, and we were all expected to eat it. There was no asking what we children might like for dinner; there were no options available to us. Seven layer dinner – *eat it*. Kidneys au gratin – *eat it*. One unforgettable experiment for dessert – bourbon bomb – *eat it*.

When our first child arrived, by contrast, this is how meal time went: “You don’t want what we cooked for mommy and daddy tonight? No worries, what would you like? Oh, you don’t like Annie’s whole grain, organic macaroni and cheese? Let me try Kraft. Oh, you don’t like the traditional shape, it has to the one with dinosaur shapes?” And so on. It never occurred to me that this was not the right thing to do. My parents told us we were crazy, but hey, they are the older generation, what did they know?

It doesn’t stop with food, of course, this catering to the younger generation. We have plans for the weekend – oh no we don’t, we have to schedule around the kid’s sports schedule. A family vacation? – gotta go someplace the kids will enjoy. A retirement account? – in my dreams -- that gets drained for six-figure college educations.

In the time of Jesus, by contrast, children were regarded as nonpersons, or not-yet-persons. Child mortality was astronomical, so why invest heavily in those who might not ever make it to maturity? What children had was potential, and if they made it to adulthood, if they passed successfully through that period of apprenticeship called growing up, when they could be productive members of the family unit, well *that* was something to be celebrated. Until then, children were among the least valued members of society, along with the disabled, the chronically ill, the widows, the slaved, those cast out as “unclean.”

Jesus’ cradling of the little child does not happen in a vacuum. He asks the disciples what they were talking about as they had made the day’s journey, and they are so ashamed that they remain silent. But Jesus knows, and he knows that they had been arguing about who among them was the greatest.

Who held down the top ranking in Jesus’ Fab Dozen? Who is first among the disciples? Who, as they ask in the text we looked at last week, is going to have the privilege of sitting at Jesus’ right hand when he makes it to the top, when he comes into power?

And so Jesus tells them that they have everything upside down, that their earthly priorities are 180 degrees out of sync with God’s heavenly ones, that whoever wants to be first must be last, and not only that, servant of all. A servant – at the bottom of the earthly org chart. One who waits upon others, cares for others, take care of their needs. A servant, one who society de-values and to whom it affords no power. A servant, one who eats only after everyone else has had their fill.

Someone like – well, like this small child Jesus places among them.

Jesus is not reinforcing human society’s values, he is not presenting us with some saccharine scene in which Jesus cuddles little children and urges us to do the same. No, what he gives us is, as theologian Sharon Ringe puts it, “a powerful and even shocking depiction of the paradoxical values of God’s will and reign, which confronts the dominant values of human societies and assign worth and importance to every person” – even, and especially, to those considered by a society to be its least important and least valuable.

So if we take Jesus at his command, if we follow this teaching, then of course we must be about the vital task of caring for the children, not just our own, but all children, particularly those who are the most weak, vulnerable, and powerless in our society.

So of course we have hosted the West Parish Family School these past five decades, providing quality preschool opportunities for area families, and of course we try to make it as affordable as possible, granting scholarships where there is need and taking children who come with state vouchers.

And of course, Christie Burns was a founder of A Baby Center, an outreach of the Cape Cod Council of Churches, the mission of which is to provide low-income families with infants and toddlers cribs and strollers and clothes and diapers.

And of course, to meet the spiritual needs of young families who find themselves otherwise engaged on Sunday mornings, we started our Saturday at 4:30 service, where children are not only welcome but are incorporated as worship leaders throughout the service, and then have Saturday School over in Jenkins Hall.

And because Jesus tells us that we must serve those who society regards as the most vulnerable and values the least, we are first in caring in other ways as well. For example,

members of this congregation began the Friends of Prisoners program, seeking to help those who ran afoul of the law and who, upon release, had little or no resources, to help them make a new start once they had served their time.

With housing costs being prohibitively expensive here on the Cape for young, working families, we have been active in Habitat for Humanity builds here.

There is another segment of the population which society often would hide away from sight, account of little value, and rather ignore, and that is those at the other end of life’s spectrum from the little child Jesus placed in the midst of those disciples long ago – the “snow-crowned age” of another hymn we sing, the aged, and particularly those dealing with the disabilities that often come with aging.

In the time of Jesus, and indeed in many cultures and eras, the elderly were esteemed for their wisdom and their experience in raising the generations to follow them, and yet in our culture which so values children and the young, the older members of our community are often shunted aside and considered a burden, not a gift.

And so of course we here at West Parish know that we must be first in caring for everyone, particularly the older members among us. Our Called to Care lay ministries, so capably led in the past by Anne Wildman and Marge Hemr, now headed up by Shirley Stolte, strives to help this most vulnerable section of our congregation in whatever ways it can.

But you, of course, the wider congregation, you are first in caring in countless other ways as well. I think of the Rooster Crows crafting ladies, who meet each Thursday to make neat crafts for the fair, but who also watch over each other and are careful to follow-up if someone misses a meeting. I think of Lynn Parker and her helpers, including the Saturday School children yesterday, who make gift bags for shut-ins for Halloween, Christmas and Easter. I think of how you shower folk who end up in the hospital with cards of concern. And yes, I think of the way you dig deep into your financial resources to help fund our ministries, which are all about caring for folk here and in the world beyond our doors.

Jesus tells us that when we do this – when we are first in caring, serving the last and the least among us, reaching out to help in a myriad of ways those whom society at large would just rather ignore – then we are in truth welcoming Jesus, and welcoming the who one sent him, as well. Servant leadership will not pad our bank accounts, not get our faces on the cover of Vogue or People magazine, and indeed will not solve all the world’s problems. But when we serve others, particularly the most vulnerable among us, including bright youth and snow-crowned age, we welcome Jesus, and we welcome our heavenly Father above, and that, my friends, is more than enough. Amen.