

Welcoming One Such Child
University United Methodist Church – 11:00 a.m. chapel service
Rev. Paul Dubois
September 20, 2009
Scripture: Mark 9:30-37

Here we are again. Another week out in the world, another morning gathered together to worship. We wake up this morning and (scanning the football scores) we find that some who had hoped to be number one have had their hopes dashed... while the hopes of others to be the greatest may endure for at least another week. At some level, we know football is just a game... right? And so there is this ringing echo from scripture today that's not about football, but, rather, it is about us, and how we have spent the last week. Has our attention been directed inward towards ourselves, or outward, towards one such child, towards Jesus, and towards the one who sent him?

Today's scripture looks a lot like the weekly cycle of our lives as Christians, a weekly cycle that starts out in the world on a Monday, and ends together in church on a Sunday. Starting with the mystery of our faith, and ending with a question and a challenge of how to live faithfully. What does it mean for us to welcome 'one such child'?

We begin with Jesus and the disciples walking through Galilee, and Jesus tells the disciples about what is to come—he makes an Easter prediction:

"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.

This is our Christian story... a narrative that reminds us that we are always en route to Easter. We don't always understand it, but it is the mystery of our faith, the central narrative and the central reality about who we are and why. And it's OK to not understand... but we keep telling the story... we keep living into the cycle. Our tradition as Christians reminds us of this story; it is never far from who we understand ourselves to be, even if we don't always understand the mystery.

Then, after arriving in Capernaum,

Jesus asked the Disciples "What were you arguing about on the way?" But they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another who was the greatest.

This is the counter-narrative that describes how we find ourselves and our lives complicated in the world. It fights for space in our lives, telling us that we have to be first, we have to win, we have to accumulate, we have to be comfortable... and the inevitable competition amongst one another to have or even to be more than the other. Our families, our

jobs, and our politics become zero sum games; if I am the greatest, then, by definition, you are not. We are lured by convenience, things that make our lives 'easier', that sweep problems and troubles away, that separate us from one another. When Jesus confronts us about our own priorities in life... we, too, are silent... with shame.

Then Jesus sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all."

And here we move into worship. We have come together, and Jesus is present with us right now, sitting among us, teaching us (through Spirit, words, song, and, of course, the bread and the wine), guiding us, loving us. Through his teaching he reorients our priorities. "No," he says, "If you want to be the greatest, this is what being the greatest looks like." To be first is to make our lives not about us, but about others. We come to worship for this reminder, to give thanks to the God who provides for us and cares for us and has never and will never abandoned us.

Then he took a little child and put it among them;

And how do we—in this place—start worship? We start with the children. The children come forward and sit, and we honor them first and above all. Maybe we speak to the children first out of a desperate hope... that they will somehow benefit the most from what we do today. But there's a problem... Jesus did not place the child before the disciples for the child's benefit, but rather for the benefit of those who follow him:

and taking the child in his arms, he said to the disciples, "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me."

And just like that, the story is over. We are left with not a command, not a doctrine, but a clue. A clue to the kingdom of God. This clue has to do with us... it has to do with God... and it has to do with whom God places before us.

And then the cycle starts over again... we're back in the world, but the mystery of Christ's life, death, and resurrection still forms the fabric of our identity. We carry the clue with us, and we hope that the world's destructive counter-narrative—that of being first—is kept at bay.

When Jesus begins to teach, he places a child before us. Imagine that child. It's a warm and happy image. What was the child doing around all of these grownups to begin with? I expect there were a few children around, somehow playing with each other, keeping each other company, keeping each other out of trouble. Perhaps when Jesus entered the house in Capernaum the children were sent out to play. But, as if on cue, a stream of squealing children comes running in and through the house, a well-timed coincidence to break up the

uncomfortable silence following Jesus' question to the disciples, "what were you arguing about?" Jesus swoops and grabs a child, perhaps as he does he makes a monster noise... Grrrrr!... as the squealing child is plucked from among its companions and placed at the center of attention. I imagine some dirty knees, and perhaps some scratches and bruises, but most of all I imagine a child's embarrassed smile, glad to be chosen by Jesus, but not really sure how to respond. There are, after all, a bunch of grownups standing around. This is not really a setting in which children back then would be comfortable. I'm not sure if it is a boy or a girl; the text is ambiguous—simply a 'child.' But, boy or girl, it was a small child. In my mind, somewhere between 2 and 5 years old, a small child who is happily underfoot.

Jesus wraps his arms around the child. Imagine that embrace. Imagine Jesus embracing that child. It's a warm and happy image. I see Jesus setting the child down in front of me, maybe Jesus wraps his arms around the child from behind, so that I can see both faces—the faces of Jesus and the child. They're smiling. Maybe as Jesus comes close to the child, he puts his cheek to the child's head, his nose buried in the child's hair, and he breathes in the smell of the child, taking in the child's essence, all of who the child is. There's a little kiss to the head. Maybe, while his arms are around the child, Jesus wiggles his fingers on the child's sides, and the child collapses in a fit of giggles. The child likes this attention, knowing that this grown up, revered by all the other grownups present, has placed him or her at the center of the gathering. This grownup, Jesus, has *seen* this child, and he is asking all of the other grownups *to see* the child, too. At some point, the child rushes off to rejoin the other children.

As an element in a story, a child is a powerful image. A child represents a parent's deepest hope. Children are innocent and pure. They are not perfect... but there are times that they are. There is an innocence associated with a child, and, to a degree, with childhood. It is this sense of purity and hope that draws us into the image of a child. But for Jesus—as for us—we're not simply talking about an image, but a human being. And human beings are somewhat complicated.

Children have needs. Life or death needs. The text says it was a 'little child,' and little children are completely dependent on adults. Maybe the child whom Jesus places before us has a runny nose or a dirty diaper, and needs an adult's help to become clean. Maybe the child is hungry, and needs an adult to provide food. Maybe the child is being bullied, and needs an adult's protection. Maybe the child is scared, sad, or alone... and simply needs a hug, an intimate presence with an adult. Eventually, of course, we realize that we are all of these children. Eventually, we realize that the point of the story is not so much about the child, as it is about the embrace.

Put the two images—the image of child and the image of embrace—together. A child not only represents our hope, but also represents our need. An embrace not only represents our need, but also represents our ability. And in the clue to the kingdom that we are called to serve all, we find ourselves as not only the child with needs, but as disciples of Christ we are empowered to embrace. To welcome one such child. To hold one another, and to put my

cheek to your head, and to breath in each other's smell, to take in each other's essence. To embrace all that the other presents for us. Like the image of the child, we are given the image of the embrace. Jesus calls this 'welcoming.'

Like the disciples, sometimes I think that we think too much. Here in scripture, when Jesus presents us with a passion prediction... we don't know what to think and so we are afraid, and we are silent. Then, when we're confronted after thinking about unimportant and destructive things, like who's number one, we are ashamed and we are silent. The kingdom clue that we are offered today is not one of thought or belief—although it is rooted in the firm and certain knowledge of God's love for us in and through Jesus Christ—but, it is a clue that gestures towards a welcoming embrace of the children of God whom Jesus places before us. An embrace that only we, only you, can offer.

This week, I pray that Jesus places a child before each of you. Maybe a 2 to 5 year old child with dirty knees who is happy underfoot... maybe a sixty year old child who simply wants to be seen and heard, but most certainly a child whom Jesus himself would hug, and breath in, and tickle. A child of God. In this prayer it is our challenge to offer that hug of Christ, to take it all in, needs and 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 not me but the one who sent me."