

Pentecost 16B, Proper 20 092009
Proverbs 31:10-31, Psalm 1,
James 3:16-4:3, 7-8a, Mark 9:30-37

In the name of One God – Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Amen.

We've all seen them, those paintings and sculptures of Jesus, surrounded by children. They have titles like, "Jesus loves the children," and "Jesus blesses the children." And for the most part, they all look pretty much alike. They have what could be called, the Arian Jesus (often blond – or brunette with blond highlights – but almost always blue-eyed and with alabaster skin), surrounded by little children who are also, almost always, blond and blue-eyed, sort of chubby and healthy looking, with big, bright-toothed smiles and sparkling clean. In fact, take a look at the cover of your service bulletin. Those are exactly the kids I'm talking about, except that those in the picture are more multi-national. But either way, they are very 21st century and very affluent.

And we've heard sermons that are preached right out of those pictures – sermons that say things like, "Come to Jesus with the innocence of a child and you'll finally understand the love of God." Well ... this morning I challenge us all to look at this scene through new eyes – perhaps eyes that will tell us a different story about what Jesus is saying to His disciples and to us.

First, let's set this scene. Jesus and the disciples are back at home in Capernaum. The disciples have been out listening to Jesus teach and watching Him work among the

crowds. They have returned to their home base and are back among friends and family. The first half of Mark's Gospel has been about Jesus' great deeds of healing and miraculous power. The disciples have seen what He can do. Now the second half of this Gospel is taken up with Jesus trying to convince the disciples of who He really is – and then equipping them for their ministry after He is gone.

Jesus has just predicted what will happen to Him in Jerusalem and they've argued about that a little bit. He now inquires of the Disciples as to what they were discussing during the last leg of their journey, as they were headed home. They finally admit that their conversation centered on who would be the greatest, once Jesus was gone. Then as we have all heard so many times, Jesus says, "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all." And *He sets a child among them* and says, "Whoever welcomes one *such child* in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me."

Now the one set amongst them is in all likelihood, not a blond, blue-eyed, beautifully attired little child, who is well behaved and looks adoringly at Jesus. That is not the point. This is much more likely to be a dirty, barely dressed, smelly and underfed street urchin. You see, in ancient Israel, children had no value in society. It wasn't just that they were valued less than men – as women were, with their value based upon to whom they belonged. Instead, children were seen by society as having actually a *negative* value. They were a drain on the family resources. They were neither big

enough nor strong enough to work the fields or the shop or to cook for the family. They simply added nothing to family economics and therefore required only what was necessary for their survival. In addition, if the father left the family or died, the mother had no way to support the children and they would likely have to leave the house and start to beg to survive.

All of this is so foreign and unbelievable to 21st century Americans that we have trouble connecting with it. But it is *our* society that has elevated children to the status of beloved and cherished beings. Ancient societies looked at children as commodities at best or, at worst as utterly expendable.

Jesus' message to the disciples that day was not, "Be innocent and loveable like this child, then you will get it." Rather, the message was, "If you want to truly be great in the Kingdom of God, you must be willing, not to get down there on the lowest rung of society, but get off the bottom of the societal ladder altogether, and at the bottom serve those who are unwelcome – the way I do."

There was very little in society that had less value than a street child, and Jesus used just such a one to make the point that it was all about service to the lowest of the low and the fact that these lowly ones had immeasurable value in the Kingdom. Jesus told them that the *valueless* in society had *great* value to Him – in other words God loves and even glorifies that which you count as nothing. The disciples were asking each other who would be the greatest, who would be the one who would have power

and glory and riches after Jesus left. Jesus says in response, “the door to the Kingdom is small. You have to be small, meek, humble – LOWLY enough to enter it or you’ll never get through.”

I’ve never had the privilege of visiting the Holy Land, but I understand that even today there are an inordinate number of street children running around in places begging from tourists. I read about a woman who was on a tour of Jerusalem when her group was accosted by a large number of dirty children, wanting any coins the tourists would give. The tour guide was asked why the government couldn’t do something about them so that they wouldn’t bother people that way. In answer the Arab tour guide said, “This is a poor country. A few coins is a fortune to these people. Now you see why your Jesus was crucified merely for saying, ‘let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of God.’”

Today we cannot fathom children being so lowly as to serve as Jesus’ example in this story. Today children have great societal value (sometimes even too much value) – but not all children. There are still those who could be examples we could more easily connect with.

Most, if not all of you, know our story. Donna and I adopted Taylor as soon as legally possible after she was born. We got to upstate New York, where our niece gave birth, as soon as we could after Taylor was born. Donna arrived when she was only a day old. We had told our niece that we would adopt her baby several months before the

due date, so we were all ready for that. What we weren't ready for was the news that she had Down Syndrome and other serious medical problems which required immediate surgery. We sat in a hospital meeting room and heard from very nice and well-meaning geneticists and social workers. Genetically (we heard that) because of the type of Down Syndrome she has, any children Taylor might bear in the future have a 100% chance of having Down Syndrome. The social worker however did not have any such certainty.

She said there were no accurate predictors of Taylor's success in school, in work or in life itself. Therefore she understood why Donna and I might change our minds about adoption. She very plainly told us that institutionalization was a possibility that we should consider, as was long-term foster care with people who "were equipped" to care for Taylor. In other words, she could understand how we might conclude that there was not much value to Taylor's life and therefore, we could deal with her that way.

It is about just such a one that Jesus speaks this morning. It is about the facilities full of mentally retarded adults around our nation. At one such facility we visited in Houston, a four year old Taylor ran around and talked (as best she could) with retarded adults who also had trouble communicating. One of the residents came up to us and asked us if we were Taylor's parents. We said we were, and he said, "She's smart!" It is about these who are markedly different than we are; these who don't look like us, these who often don't smell like us; these who don't act like us; these whose behavior

we (and they) sometimes cannot control – it is about these that Jesus speaks, not the cherubic, perfect children of oil paintings.

Jesus says this morning, if you want to be great in the Kingdom of Heaven, you'd better understand what you've asked for. The last – the lowliest, the most unclean, the most unacceptable – will be first and those who believe they're first – the most powerful and well cared for – will be the last. Jesus says, "Take up your cross and follow me. Follow me into places where you're not comfortable; where people make you wince, where people make you draw back; where people make your skin crawl. That's where I work. That's the congregation I came to serve." Jesus says, "I came to show God's love to the unlovable. If you're my disciple, you must do likewise."

It's hard work. It's constant work. It's often uncomfortable work. But it's Jesus' work. And it's our work. That's how it is for disciples; for cross-bearers like you and me. We are His disciples in the world today. We are the ones who come here every week and sit at His feet and learn from Him. We come here every week and are fed at His table, nourished by His body and blood, strengthened by His sacrifice. This hard, dirty, difficult work is what He asks in return. It's our calling and every week He equips us to handle it. The question is: "Are we willing?"

Amen.