

**Mark 9:30-37**

***Like a Child***  
**September 20, 2015**

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This sounds a lot like last week, doesn't it? The disciples can't seem to get it, can they? Here Jesus is, talking about the coming days when he would be betrayed – handed over by his own people – executed on a cross as if he were a criminal – and then, wonder of wonders – in three days he would rise again!

He's telling his very closest, chosen friends (his disciples) all this – teaching them. But they aren't paying attention. Instead of trying to understand what he is saying, they are arguing over who will have the highest position next to Jesus when he finally comes into his kingdom – that is, when he finally conquers their oppressors - the Romans.

So, after they've been on the road a while, making their journey to Capernaum, they enter the house where they are staying, and Jesus asks them to tell him what they were arguing about. They knew, of course, he wouldn't be pleased so they just zipped up their lips and did the silent treatment.

But Jesus knew. And he sat down and said to them "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all, and servant of all." And then, he gave them a visual. He took a small child in his arms and said "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me, welcomes not me, but the one who sent me."

When we first hear this, we might think, "how easy that is! We love children. We want children to be in our midst. We are so thankful for little children." Right?

Welcoming children seems to be the key point from Jesus. No problem! Children are not hard to welcome, are they?

We love our children here at HPC. We are so happy to see their darling faces, to see what they do and hear what they say. We don't mind if they are a bit noisy or if they run up and down the isles. They are our treasures. They are part of our family; important members of the church today, and in the future.

It's a true fact, isn't it? The children we know best are not difficult to welcome. They are well dressed, well fed, clean, and their parents are teaching them how to behave, how to fit into our society. And, depending on their age level, they are getting it. Even if the parents don't always feel like that is true.

I honestly don't know if our middle class children today would be the best example for Jesus in this teaching. We hold our children in pretty high esteem, don't we? Today, we parent differently than the parenting of the past.

Fred remembers going to his grandparent's house and being expected to sit on the couch beside his other three siblings for a lengthy amount of time, and not utter a word unless he was asked a question. "Children are to be seen and not heard" was the motto back then.

And my mother's response to my asking her "why" when she told me to do something, was "because I said so, that's why." And that was a good enough answer. I know we can't put all parenting in the same category, but I see parents today doing things different. Giving explanations to the "why" question. When I go to my daughters, my grandchildren are the top priority for attention. I remember waiting a long time to get a word in, when adults came to visit our home.

Believe me, this is no judgment on parenting skills – of the past, or the present. Things change, over time. My point is that children – our children in most of the families we represent here in our congregation – are not looked down on or treated as if they are unimportant little people.

But children were not held in such high esteem in Jesus' day. Of course, a son was more valued than a daughter. At least a boy would carry on the name, would take on your business, would be in charge of your land and take care of his parents when they were old.

That's not to say a daughter wasn't loved, but she would be going to live in the household of her husband and helping out there in the future.

Children were loved but they weren't of much value in society. To welcome a child – to really welcome a child with authentic love and compassion, Jesus says, is to welcome him. In fact, it is more than just welcoming Jesus. It is a welcome to God – the one who sent him.

I can't help but have in my mind those horribly sad images we have seen recently. The little Syrian boy lying facedown on the beach, having drowned as the family tried to flee to safety, their boat carrying too many, finally giving in to the water that overtook them all.

I can't help but see that other little boy, so frightened by the bombs in his village and the guards at the borders that he can't stop crying, clinging to his parent.

There you go, Jesus. There is a good visual for you to use. A refugee child screaming in fear – homeless, hungry, desperate – and being turned away at every place they run to for safety, shelter and help.

*'Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.'*

Yes, I understand there is much more for countries to consider than just welcoming a child in Jesus' name. But still ... it's heartbreaking.

At the presbytery meeting in Linden last week, we heard a passionate presentation from Rev. Alonzo Johnson who works at the General Assembly level for the ***Educate a Child, Transform the World Initiative***. Here are some of the things we heard:

The 221st General Assembly in Detroit, in the summer of 2014, launched a church wide initiative calling on Presbyterians to work with partners in the United States, and the world to improve the quality of education for 1 million children by the year 2020.

This initiative builds on our strong Reformed heritage and our Presbyterian history of both educational mission and advocacy and support for access to public education. This initiative, on the national level, centers around 2 major focuses: strengthening early childhood education and reducing the dropout rate of adolescents.

Every school day in America more than 16,000 students are suspended in the public schools, almost 3,000 high school students drop out, and nearly 4,000 children and youth are arrested. Every school day in America!

Once students are suspended or expelled, they are more likely to end up in juvenile court, and then 50 percent more likely to end up in adult prisons. They call this the *Cradle to Prison Pipeline*.

These prisons cost at least three times as much as public education and have never been proven to be effective in reducing recidivism or increasing public safety.

Rev. Janet Wolf, who is director for the Children's Defense Fund, has listened to the dreams of men at the Riverbend Maximum Security Institution in Nashville, Tennessee, some of these men as young as 30, some of whom had never been in jail or convicted of anything before they were sentenced to death.

As they sit in a circle and talk about wanting to help other young people on the outside, she says they talk of growing up without a childhood, defending and feeding siblings from an early age, struggling to remain in school. (Find more information at [http://www.presbyterianmission.org/ministries/child/?utm\\_source=BWB+for+9-16-15&utm\\_campaign=BWB+9-16-15&utm\\_medium=email](http://www.presbyterianmission.org/ministries/child/?utm_source=BWB+for+9-16-15&utm_campaign=BWB+9-16-15&utm_medium=email) )

These children, who have less advantage and much less opportunity for education, are the most vulnerable in our country and around the world. These children, I believe, are especially the ones Jesus would use as a visual for us today.

*“Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me.”*

Of course, it doesn't even have to be an actual child. There are so many people in the world who are vulnerable, weak, who have so many disadvantages than we do. Jesus calls them the “little ones.” The fact is, those people become very visual to us when we see thousands of them desperately trying to find safety – to find a home.

But we have them all around us as well. We just have to be willing to see them – to look through the eyes of compassion and love – through the eyes of Jesus. There are opportunities to show the love of Christ to his “little ones” everyday, if we will just look.

“Speaking of the Christian temptation to pray about social issues without taking action, Rev. Wolf says, “We put things on God’s list of ‘things to do’ that we have already been given the power and the resources to do in this world.””

This is what Jesus means when he says if we want to be great, we must be among the last – put ourselves out there in a servant’s position – serving others, for their sakes, not ours. And, in the long run, for Christ’s sake, and for the kingdom he stands for. We are part of establishing his kingdom on earth as we follow his commands.

Today, I would ask you to consider where you are needed to show the love of Jesus. Are you gifted and able to help in some way right here in our church with our beloved children?

When I think back on my childhood and who it is that had the most positive influence in my life – there is one woman in particular who always comes to mind.

Marilyn Todd taught me, at a very young age, songs – like ***Jesus Loves Me*** and ***Jesus Loves the Little Children of the World*** – songs that gave me a sense of what kind of person Jesus is and wants me to be.

That same woman became a leader of a young girls group that did mission types of work. She encouraged me and other girls in so many ways to give of ourselves for others, and she became a great friend to confide in and ask advise of, when I was a young wife and mother.

If you are able, I would encourage you to be a loving, teaching presence for our children here at HPC. It will make a lifelong impact on their lives.

If you are able to contribute financially to help those refugee children, talk to me, or send me an email, and I will give you a direct link where you can make a donation to help, through our Presbyterian Disaster Assistance.

I can also direct you to a link where you can give for the ***Educate a Child, Transform the World Initiative***.

But I also challenge us all to ask God to show us, with clear vision, who He is putting in our pathway to help in some way this week. Let us be a welcoming servant of Christ.

In welcoming those who are vulnerable we are welcoming Jesus. And in welcoming Jesus, we are even showing hospitality to God.

May we continue to grow into nurturing, loving, compassionate, selfless servants of God. Amen.

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