

LET THE CHILDREN COME TO ME, AND DON'T HINDER THEM

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Today's familiar text from Mark 10:13-16 is all of four verses, but I am going to put it into the larger picture frame of Mark chapters 9 and 10.

In the past months I have been studying the book of Mark with Paul DeLucenay through letters by snail mail. Many of the thoughts I bring today come from this work with him. I guess he has been a sounding board for my own observations and conversations with God over these texts. And I have been Paul's listener as well.

The two of us came to see that the children's blessing', in Mark's Gospel is a call to trust and humility placed within a struggle for identity and power among the disciples that we see in chapters 9 and 10. The disciples are asking, "Who is important?" "Aren't WE important? We are Jesus' chosen 12?" But Jesus proposes that "whoever loses his life, for my sake, will find it"—a radically different set of values, found at the end of chapter 8.

So with that background, Mark chapter 9 begins with Jesus taking his three closest friends, the INNER THREE, Peter, James and John, alone up a mountain. Luke's Gospel tells us they went up to pray, and there, transfigured in radiant light, Jesus converses with Moses and Elijah who appear and talk with him about his coming death in Jerusalem. Startled, Peter interrupts, "Lucky WE are here, Teacher! WE can build three monuments, one for each of you!" A voice from heaven responds. "THIS IS MY BELOVED SON. LISTEN TO HIM!"

This is not about national publicity or their privileged presence. It is about Jesus, who warns them to keep this experience completely quiet till he is risen from the dead.

As they are coming back from this tremendous experience, they find the other NINE of Jesus' disciples in a crowd arguing and in a state of disappointment. With the crowd, a father comes boldly rushing to Jesus with his demon possessed son, pleading, "Your disciples could do nothing. If YOU can, please help us!"

Jesus encourages him, "All things are possible to the one who believes." Immediately the father cries out his neediness "I believe! But help my unbelief!" Rebuking the evil spirit in the convulsing boy, Jesus lifts the lifeless child to his feet, healed! Not only is the child fully RESTORED, but surely a life of normalcy returns to the family. This father has received Jesus' blessing on his child, and Jesus receives the honor, not the NINE.

"Why could WE not cast out the evil spirit?" the disciples ask.
Jesus responds to them. "This can only be done by prayer."

What just happened to the disciples in these two accounts? It seems the disciples thought they were in positions with Jesus, to show their unique power and status. WE WILL BUILD MONUMENTS! WE CAN CAST OUT DEMONS. WE WILL. WE CAN. PRIDE! POWER! IDENTITY! These are all temptations!

But instead they are all called to humility. Heaven says, “Listen to my Son,” and Jesus instructs the THREE, Peter, James and John, “Tell no one.”

And to the questioning NINE, Jesus charges, “Only by prayer can such a demon be cast out.” That is, only by acknowledging YOUR dependence upon God in faith.

What is prayer but the very child-like faith of this father who takes a risk, recognizing his need. It is being vulnerable as this man’s child. It is supplication, pleading, requesting. Prayer is TRUSTING that in listening to God’s Son, the power of God can work with us to make a difference in this situation. Prayer acknowledges that WE ARE DEPENDENT.

I recognize myself in the disciples. There are times I am quick to speak up when silence and listening are called for. There are other times that I am silent, when I should speak. There are times my work is fruitless because I have acted out of my own sense of urgency, rather than courageously seeking Jesus’ Spirit to guide my prayer. And like others, I HAVE PRAYED... FERVENTLY, but haven’t been able to see the answer.

I think we have all experienced that neither faith nor prayer are a clear formula for results. But in the context of this chapter I believe we are called to beseech God’s merciful response in an attitude of bold dependency, like this father for his child.

Mark 9 continues telling us that, as Jesus traveled on to Capernaum, he was again teaching the TWELVE that he would be killed and then raised from the dead after three days. He was totally entrusting himself to God, yet I believe, Jesus recognized their need for each other in what was to come. But his students did not understand and furthermore, they were afraid to ask. Instead of being concerned about their Master and teacher, they discussed among themselves who of them was greatest!

“What were you talking about on the way?” Jesus asked them. He answered their silence with a TEACHING ON HUMILITY. “So, you want to be first? Then you must be last. Be a servant of all.” (Quote from THE MESSAGE) Then bringing a child into their midst, he took the child into his arms and said, “Look. Whoever welcomes one such child IN MY NAME welcomes ME. And whoever welcomes ME welcomes not me, but the ONE who sent me,” (NIV). Jesus demonstrates our Kingdom calling. SERVE THE LEAST OF THESE in the NAME OF JESUS, in the same WELCOMING SPIRIT AS JESUS.

John of the INNER THREE, spoke up. “Teacher, we saw a man casting out demons, IN YOUR NAME. We stopped him BECAUSE he was not following US.” Isn’t it amazing that the disciples, so recently unable to cast out a demon, had prevented another who was doing so IN THE NAME OF JESUS, in the Spirit of Jesus! Why? “Because, he was not following US.” Indeed not! That man was following JESUS! (How often do I want people to agree with me before considering whether my spirit agrees with the Spirit of Jesus. Phil 2:5-11 tells us, “Have this mind among yourselves that you have in Christ Jesus...take on the form of a servant.)

Jesus, with the little child still in his presence, continues the example of the Spirit of welcoming IN HIS NAME.

“Don’t stop that man. Anyone who can do miracles IN MY NAME is for us. Whoever gives you even a cup of water to drink because you bear MY NAME, can not be against us. The smallest action of selfless compassion or courage will be rewarded.”

“And NEVER hinder the growing faith of one of these LITTLE CHILDREN. Remove from your life those actions which hinder your witness; a critical tongue, eyes that distract you from God like the beam in your eye, wayward feet and hands. Be refined by the fire of the Holy Spirit. Be as salt that is a preservative, and preserve the peace.”

Mark 10 tells us that as Jesus arrived in Judea, crowds again gathered, and as was his custom, he taught them. In the midst of this crowd Mark 10:13-16 shows us the wonderful picture of Jesus blessing the children. This will literally be for the disciples a ‘hands on’ classroom experience in humility. (Just a note, we saw how the disciples responded to the father who brought his child looking for Jesus’ attention. Now compare this experience in light of welcoming in Jesus’ name.)

We can only imagine the size of the crowd through which a group of courageous mothers and children, of various ages, are making their way toward Jesus. Perhaps the children were quietly shy, or rambunctiously excited about this ‘field trip’. As the mothers approach, cautiously yet full of hope, for Jesus to touch and bless their children, the disciples take charge rebuking, and shooing them away.

Were the disciples protecting Jesus, or their own personal sense of importance? After all, the culture dictated that these were the unimportant persons in the crowd. Uneducated women and children had no right to break into their ‘classroom.’ By now the children might be dusty, dirty, runny nosed and as such, unclean.

Eugene Peterson in *THE MESSAGE*, paints this picture of what happened next. ‘Jesus was irate and let the disciples know it: “Don’t ever get between them and me. These children are at the very center of life in the kingdom. Take note: Unless you accept God’s kingdom as the trusting simplicity of a child, you’ll never get in.”

Then gathering the children up in his arms, he laid his hands of blessing on them.

What is it about children that make them the first into the kingdom? They are trusting, have a sense of their smallness, and dependency. They are joyful helpers. They are appreciative, not proud or deceitful. They are eager learners, thriving and growing on love, affirmation, and encouragement. Children are among ‘the little ones’ on the fringe that Jesus always sees and cares for. They are often pushed aside or ignored, as are the sick, handicapped, imprisoned, poor, or disadvantaged. But they can also be embarrassingly bold, innocently candid, trustingly demanding. Like their mothers, they seem to know they are recipients of the Good News of freedom and welcome. They are among the least who will be first into the kingdom.

In front of the gathered crowd the disciples must have been humbled at Jesus’ response to the women and children. I am humbled, too. I have my own story to tell.

As I sat at my computer at 9:00 Tuesday evening, ready to work at the children's blessing part of this teaching, my computer froze up, and Keith was not at home to help me out. Nothing I could do made a difference. I felt helpless. OK Lord, now what?

Just then at 9:15 the phone rang and it was Tyrone Taylor, our neighbor and pastor at New Foundations in Christ Church, asking for help, saying, "I just brought home a homeless woman and her baby. She was pushing the baby and their belongings in a grocery cart along Cleveland Avenue. She is homeless. Her baby is 11 months old and she is 18. She is just a child herself! Faith Mission is full tonight. Do you have any ideas where we might take her for the night? Cora Brown is in Florida and Emerge is not possible. Tangie and I have never done this before."

I thought to myself, "Well, I've never taken in homeless before, either. And I'm trying to write a sermon."

I could hear the words of Jesus, "To receive one of these little ones in my name (in my Spirit of welcome,) is to receive me, and the One who sent me. Let the children come to me!" I knew I could drop my study plans and say, "We will make room for them tonight." I knew, like the disciples I could choose try to send them away. (That is what I chose.)

Passing the buck, I told Tyrone, "I'll check with Suella and Barb to see what places they know of, and I will call you back." By the time I did all the checking and Keith had returned home, Tyrone had found a place for the homeless guests at a neighbor's home. "Lord bless them all," I prayed. I knew I had passed by the blessing of welcoming Christ.

By the next day, Tangie was able to find the woman and her baby lodging at the YWCA's Women's Shelter, and I could go on working on this sermon--with less guilt!

I thought of Rianna and Bennie in the Poor People's campaign. And Rianna's account of seeing the face of Jesus in the women who shared the Jail cell with her for 14 hours of intense stench, heat and cold. She saw Jesus in the cell mate who shared her coat with Rianna. Rianna saw Jesus in the woman who called 911 to report her boyfriend's abuse, and ended up in jail herself, while he went free. Rianna took the risk and saw the face of Jesus.

According to Mark 10, following the Children's Blessing, a rich young man urgently ran up to Jesus. He was law abiding and seriously seeking to be faithful. Jesus lovingly invited him, "Come join me in the Poor People's Campaign. "Sell all you have and give it to the poor and you will find your way into the narrow door of the Kingdom. Then come, follow me." The young man went away full of sorrow, holding on to his security and importance, but lacking the courage to make himself child-like and vulnerable.

Jesus turned to his disciples and said, "Children, how hard it is for the rich to enter the Kingdom of God!" Peter responded, "WE have left everything to follow you."

"Yes," affirmed Jesus, "and you will receive houses, families, and lands with persecutions and eternal life to come. But many are first who will be last and many will be last who are first."

And as they were back out on the road, Jesus began to clearly tell the TWELVE, “We are going to Jerusalem where I will be condemned to death, and killed; and after three days I will rise.” Is he saying, “You are the family I’ve been given, and we need each other more than ever for what is coming?”

But James and John, two of the INNER THREE pulled him aside and asked him, “When you come into your glory, permit that we two brothers will sit one to your left and one to your right.” Jesus responded, “That is not for me to grant.”

Then Jesus said to THE TWELVE, “Leaders in this world like to exercise authority over one another. But it should not be so with you. Whoever would be great among you must be willing to serve you. The Son of Man has come not to be served but to give his life to set many free.”

Now as they came through Jericho a blind beggar named Bartimaeus heard that Jesus of Nazareth was passing. As he cried out to Jesus, others tried to shush this dirty no body, this “little one.” (Does this remind us of the disciples and the children?) But Bartimaeus only cried louder. “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me.”

Can you hear Jesus’ call of welcome? “Let the children come. Come Bartimaeus! What do you want?” Bartimaeus threw off his cloak, his only possession. He had no riches to cling to for security, as did the rich young man. He made his way to Jesus. “Teacher, let me receive my sight!”

This child of the Kingdom did not want fame or power, or a special place... only eyes to see his Teacher... and the wherewithal to boldly follow him.

And Jesus responded joyfully, “Go your way. Your faith has restored you!” Mark writes. ‘And immediately he received his sight and FOLLOWED JESUS on the WAY’

Did the disciples for a moment have eyes to ‘see’ this lesson on courageous humility? Do we hear Jesus call? “Let the CHILD in you come to me. Don’t hold back.”

“Fear not little flock. It is God’s good pleasure to give you the Kingdom.” (Lk.12:32)