Mark 9:33-37

**Who Is the Greatest?**

33 Then they came to Capernaum; and when he was in the house he asked them, ‘What were you arguing about on the way?’34But they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another about who was the greatest.35He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, ‘Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.’36Then he took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms, he said to them,37‘Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.’

Our Most Precious Gifts

Being a kid has not always been a time of fun and games. In Jesus’ day, childhood was not celebrated as a time of play. No one had closets full of toys. There were no children’s movies, books, CDs, or theme parks. Children were considered to have little present value as they did nothing to help a family’s plight. In fact they were burdens to be endured until they reached an age when they could start to work. They were expected to stay at home with their mothers and not get in anyone’s way. Child death was common as the mortality rate for those under sixteen years of age was about fifty percent, so mothers often bore numerous children with the expectation that only half would survive to adulthood.

This harsh environment would have made Jesus’ actions and words shocking to his audience, taking a child whose hanging around (shouldn’t she be at home, anyway?) and saying, “Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me…” Why would anyone welcome a child? That’s just a mouth to feed. I can welcome someone who does something for me, but a child?

And though things are clearly better for children in our country than they were for the children of Jesus’ time and place, can we say that things are better for children across the world? In the horn of Africa? In the slums of India? According to UNICEF, twenty-one children in the world die every minute of causes that can be prevented. Every year, twenty one million children die unnecessarily. Countless others are victims of physical and sexual abuse. Many are sold into slavery. Many are abandoned and forced to make it on their own. Given such facts, we must ask ourselves how well we as a people are doing at welcoming our children.

Interesting that Jesus offers us this lesson in response to the disciples’ argument about who is the greatest. On most every scale of human greatness (intelligence, talent, power, wealth, strength) children rate low. But once again Jesus exposes the distinction between what the world considers great and what God considers great.

If I were to compete in almost any way with a child, I would win; I’m smarter, bigger, stronger, wiser, etc. But Jesus makes the point the being the greatest means not *competing* but rather *welcoming*. It’s a complete shift in paradigm. And if I serve others, it means that I put them first (read: the first shall be last). But as long as I strive to become the best, as long as I compete with others to be #1, I will never know God or see his kingdom. There’s a story of a young rabbinical student who asks the rabbi, "Rabbi, why don't people see God today as they did in the olden days?" The wise old man put his hands on the student's shoulders and said, "The answer, my son, is because no one is willing to stoop so low."

We need to be as children, and we need to welcome others as children. Our worth in God’s eyes in not contingent upon anything we do or say, not on any talent or ability. We are simply loved, and there’s nothing we can do to enhance or remove that love. And knowing this, we are now free to welcome “the least of these.” Freely we have received; freely we must give.

And this is the paradigm we need to expose our children to. It’s tragic that so few teenagers attend our churches, yet they continually fall victim to drug and alcohol abuse, depression, and despair. What can reverse this trend? Parents who live in the assurance of salvation, who *know* God loves them unconditionally and celebrate that love in worship. Parents who nurture their children in the environment of God’s love.

And the rest of the congregation needs to do its absolute best to embrace the young parents in God’s love. We can remember the challenges of parenthood. In Christian love, we must do everything we can to help these young families, to encourage them to come to church where their children will learn of Jesus Christ and the joys of living in God’s kingdom.

On this Children’s Sabbath, let us embrace a vision of these children as zealous, God-loving youth who are engaged in God’s mission. Let us pledge ourselves to raise them as disciples of Christ, joyfully serving our Lord together.