

Welcome the Child
Mark 9:30-37

Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost/ 19th September 2021

What Jesus says here is astonishing. It's not surprising that the disciples want to know who's the greatest. Roman society was hierarchical. They want to know where they rank as a follower of Jesus. Status means everything. The disciples want to know who is above them and who is below them. In Roman society, once you figured out where you were in the pecking order you were encouraged to stay there for your entire life. That's what was meant by "being humble." Being humble meant "staying within one's inherited social status, not grasping to upgrade oneself and one's family at the expense of another."¹ You knew who was at the top—the emperor—and you knew who was on the very bottom—the slave—and somewhere in between, probably closer to the bottom, was you.

Which makes what Jesus says all the more shocking. In the privacy of this house, not out in the public, Jesus doesn't judge them for asking, but he does dismantle their assumptions about reality and shows them a still more excellent way. He shakes their foundations, the structural core of their moral universe. He does this by lobbing at them the curve ball of all curve balls, something so counter-intuitive, something they would never have considered valuable or possible or even desirable or sane. Jesus unmask the power structures of his society and the disciples' aspirations for power and privilege, and then undermines, undercuts their value system. It's as if Jesus is taking on or hoping to heal all the damage inflicted upon a society organized around status. "*Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all*" (Mk. 9:35). *That* would have left them speechless. *That* would have left them breathless. It still does.

This is what could be called the gospel's gracious grand reversal. Jesus reverses the pecking order. "The first shall be last and the last shall be first" (Mark 10:31). God's good news *always* questions and judges the prevailing morality and ideology of *every* culture, including our own. If you want to be first, if you want to be great, if you want something to feel honorable about, then give up your status, set aside your privilege, move in the opposite direction of where you are, choose downward mobility. Instead of wanting to be served by others, instead of looking for others to serve your need or wishes, *serve*—serve all, especially the ones society deems "below" you or those you consider beneath you. When you do, you will discover they are not "below" you but maybe "above" you because they carry God's favor, because God is with them. Or if not "above" you, you see them as equal to you, as one who bears the images of God just like you. If you want glory, then be who you were created to be—serve one another, serve the least among you.

And with that Jesus reaches over and places among them a little child and he puts his arms around the child. He takes the child in his arms and says: *See, like this. Here, like this. This is where you start. This is how you do it.* Even this gesture was wildly radical and subversive and must have left them speechless, breathless. Embrace *this* child. *Not* idealized innocence. See *this* child, the least.

Children in Roman society were slightly higher than slaves. Like slaves, they had no status, no rights. They were invisible. To call someone a child was a serious insult (Matthew 11:16-17), making Jesus' invitation to become like children absolutely absurd (Matthew 18:3). "Childhood in antiquity was a time of terror. Infant mortality rates sometimes reached 30 percent. Another 30 percent of live births were dead by age six, and 60 percent were gone by age sixteen. Children were the first to suffer from famine, war, disease, and dislocation, economic deprivation, and in some areas or eras few would have lived to adulthood with both parents alive. The orphan was the image of the weakest and most vulnerable member of society. Childhood was thus a time of terror."² Surviving to adulthood was cause for celebration. That's why rites of passage ceremonies were so important in earlier cultures, they meant that you made it, you survived childhood. This is not to say that children weren't loved and valued. They were. Having children promised continuation of the family, as well as security and protection to parents in old age.^{[3][4]} Still, it was a dangerous time.

It's still a dangerous time for children. According to the [United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees](#), an estimated 35 million (42%) of the 82.4 million forcibly displaced people are children below 18 years of age. In 2020, one million children were born as refugees. Children are still vulnerable in our society, especially children growing up in poverty in the U.S. Consider all those children now on the U.S.-Mexico border. The pandemic has increased a child's vulnerability. Without a vaccine for the youngest they are truly among the most vulnerable today. The [pandemic's impact upon children](#) has been severe, some say devastating, taking a social, emotional, and academic performance toll on children with repercussions that will stretch over many years. It's been said, "We're going to almost need a New Deal for an entire generation of kids to give them the opportunity to catch up."⁴ On Friday, the [American Academy of Pediatrics](#) announced that BMI (body mass indicator) rates nearly doubled in children and adolescents during the pandemic.⁵

I can throw disturbing statistics around all day. They're helpful to a degree. However, statistics can separate us from the situation at hand; they depersonalize and dehumanize. It's tough to wrap your arms around a statistic. Each statistic has a beating heart, made of flesh and blood. This text refers to children and yet it's about more than children. Jesus embracing a child was a symbolic action demonstrating the core of his ministry, declaring what matters most in the kingdom of God.^{[6][5]} Greatness is defined by how we care for and serve the most vulnerable among us. Jesus is really talking about welcoming, embracing, and holding close to our hearts the most vulnerable souls in our society: the weakest, the marginalized, the ignored or excluded, those without power, without choice, without agency, the economically vulnerable, living from paycheck to paycheck, meal to meal, the poor, the orphan—from the Greek word *orphos* meaning bereft or lost. These are the people we are called to love and to serve, the least of these among us, be they children or adults, or adults who are as vulnerable as children. As we know, this is kingdom work. Mahatma Gandhi (1869-1948) caught the vision of the kingdom when he said, "A nation's greatness is measured by how it treats its weakest members." It's also what makes a church "great" in Jesus' eyes (not the size of its membership or its endowment). It's also what makes a human being "great."

Jesus calls us to wrap our arms around a fellow-child of God. To welcome a "child"—to embrace, welcome, extend hospitality and provide sanctuary to the most vulnerable in our

society—means that we are at the same time welcoming Jesus: to welcome him is to welcome and embrace the One who welcomes and embraces us all. *This* is what the kingdom of God is all about. *This* is what we're called to, this joyful difficult work. We are engaged in this work as a congregation. But as you know, there's always more work to be done.

But perhaps this is how you're feeling, that when we think about the needs it's easy to be overwhelmed by it all, to take it all in. And, if we're honest, sometimes it is difficult to empathize with the least among us, sometimes it is difficult to empathize with the marginalized and most vulnerable. Perhaps it's tough having compassion and extending a welcome. Maybe it makes you uneasy. It can be so overwhelming. But maybe, if this is the case, then maybe we can start closer to home. What if the welcome Jesus is talking about here includes welcoming a child we knew well or maybe used to know well, and that's the child within us. The text doesn't say this, of course, but if we are called to love the least of these, the most vulnerable around us, then implicit in this gracious command is the invitation to love the child who still lives within us.

“In every adult there lurks a child...who requires unceasing care, attention, and even education.”^[7] We each carry within us a child. Not just the memory of a childhood, but a living psychic reality who often feels bewildered and confused, neglected and ignored, lost and alone, happy and carefree and playful, to be sure, but also anxious and sad. A child who lives behind a fortress or a castle or maybe a child forced to live like Harry Potter in a cupboard under the stairs.

What if Jesus is calling us to wrap our arms around that child, and welcome that child into or back into our lives, talk to her, listen to him, learn from him, comfort her, affirm that child? What if we are called to have a relationship with that child, an ongoing relationship with that child? Some of the deepest, most profound, and transforming experiences that I've had in my years in psychotherapy and analysis has been learning to relate to that child—to relate to Kenny—who lives within me. What if then we befriended the refugee child in us, exiled, orphaned, bereft, lost, hurt, confused, maybe overwhelmed by loss and fear and sadness, overwhelmed by the too-muchness of this world? For when we neglect the wounds and feelings of that child, when we fail to give him or her the attention that he or she deserves, that child inside starts to act up and act out and then projects all that hurt, all that woundedness and anxiety and anger and frustration “out there” towards others. As we know, the bully was once bullied—and continues to bully the child within.

But when we extend compassion and grace to that child, the beloved child within, when we befriend this exiled part of us, when we do this, I believe, something of the kingdom's grace and joy breaks into our lives too. And the world is somehow transfigured as a result. Think about it: how can we fully welcome the child “out there” if we can't or won't or won't try to welcome the child “in here,” within us? But when we do, that compassion within our hearts will be transferred to the world all around us. We will be God's beloved children reaching out to our neighbors in a new way—and it will leave those we meet and love and welcome, speechless, and breathless, full of grace and gratitude for that love, for that acceptance, for that welcome. *Maybe it be so.*



¹ See Bruce J. Malina and Richard L. Rohrbaugh, *Social-Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 237-238.

² Malina and Rohrbaugh, 237

³ Malina and Rohrbaugh, 238.

⁴ COVID is have a devastating impact on children, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/education/covid-having-devastating-impact-children-vaccine-won-t-fix-everything-n1251172>.

⁵ BMI rates nearly doubled for children, adolescents during pandemic, <https://www.aappublications.org/news/2021/09/16/pandemicbmi091621>

⁶ See Ched Myers, *Binding the Strong Man: A Political Reading of Mark's Story of Jesus* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1994), 260ff.

⁷ “For in every adult there lurks a child—an eternal child, something that is always becoming, is never completed, and calls for unceasing care, attention, and education.” C. G. Jung, “The Development of Personality,” *Collected Works of C.G Jung*, Volume 17, par. 286 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981). See also John Bradshaw’s work and PBS television series from the late-1980s, based on his book *Homecoming: Reclaiming and Championing Your Inner Child* (Judy Piatkus, 1991). See also Donald Kalsched’s work, *The Inner World of Trauma: Archetypal Defenses of the Personal Spirit* (Routledge, 1996) and *Trauma and the Soul: A psycho-spiritual approach to human development and its interruption* (Routledge, 2013).