

Mark 9:30-37

September 23, 2018 Proper 20

They didn't understand. They were afraid to ask. And so, naturally, they argued about who would be in charge when Jesus was gone.

Some commentators tell us that today's gospel is just another example of the general truth that status and power work differently in God's kingdom than in our world – those who are least here will be greatest there.

Which isn't exactly wrong, it just fails to take children seriously – as children – as Jesus took them.

Not that Jesus lived a very child-friendly life.

He didn't have a regular job or own a house. Nazareth was poor and violent and probably didn't have a very good school district – not that he was there very often. Always on the move. Hung out with a bad crowd. Frequently in trouble with the authorities.

No children's sermons are recorded in the Gospels.

Nothing about him or his life is consistent with any of the things we know are important for children – not in his own time and not in ours.

Our Messiah is no Mr. Rogers!

But he used a child as an example of leadership – to teach those who knew him best what it means to be a citizen in the kingdom of heaven or what I like to call God’s commonwealth of love and justice.

Is he serious?

What could he mean? And how should we respond?

I think he would want us to keep our children safe – from physical harm and sexual predators. He would want us to love them as they are and not because they make us feel good about ourselves.

And I am CERTAIN that Jesus would LOVE Godly Play...

Because I think he is serious about children. About real children, who are precious and grace-filled, as well as messy and unpredictable – always as much challenge as blessing. But what he means is also about more than children.

We can welcome children – especially as a primary stance of the Christian faith – even if there are no children present in our community.

How is that possible? And how is it connected to citizenship in God’s commonwealth of love and justice?

First

All of us were once children. Even Jesus was a child. And childhood is a temporary condition – not a fixed identity.

In the Bible, the poor, the widow, the orphan, the alien – these are all permanent identities. To find yourself in one of these categories is to find yourself always vulnerable, always marginalized.

Today we might speak of the homeless, immigrants, the gender-non-conforming – but we're still talking about characteristics that are largely fixed, and which more or less permanently define and limit our life-chances.

Some of us here know what it's like to be vulnerable, marginalized, because of our identity.

Such experiences often give us greater insight into the Gospel. Sometimes they make it more difficult to see the good will in others.

Being a child is different. We all were and are now adults. This gives us a shared experience of vulnerability. Even the most privileged adult was once a child.

If we can look through our common experience of this vulnerability, we might see each other with more compassion, see each other more clearly as beloved siblings in Christ – especially in our difference.

The other thing that makes children different than vulnerable adults is that Children have a different epistemology – they know what they know differently than adults.

As adults we value logic and even define childhood as a state of deficient logic, a time of magical thinking and the inability to distinguish the imaginary from the real.

We often find this charming – kids say the darndest things! – but we usually don't take it seriously. Like the child who asked if Jesus – who died but is still with us – is zombie,
Which is funny...

But...if zombies eat your brain, take away your individuality, and make you dangerous to others are we Christlike or zombie-like when we are intolerant and judgmental?

Children are may use logic, but they're hard-wired for wonder and and “what if” play.

New Testament scholar, Luke Timothy Johnson wrote recently about how to take biblical miracles “seriously” without having to understand them “literally.”

He explained that Scripture uses imagination to evoke the world of the possible – always in process, not finished, creative. This world of the possible

discloses itself slowly only to those who are open to mystery (Miracles: God's Presence and Power in Creation)

Children are also always in process, not finished, creative. Their wonder, like Scripture, evokes the world of the possible through imagination.

Even though we were all children, we often forget as adults. And so Jesus reminds us by putting a child in the midst of the anxious disciples.

He reminds us that welcoming children is much more than we sometimes think – even those of us who work with children and routinely experience children and their gifts as blessing.

Welcoming children isn't just about children, although it does mean creating sacred space for children, keeping them safe from physical, psychological, and sexual abuse, accepting them as they are, helping them come close to God "all by themselves" – as we say in Godly Play.

To welcome children in this deeper way is truly to welcome Jesus and the one who sent him.

And this welcome, as a stance of the Christian faith, is also what it means to be citizens in God's commonwealth of love and justice. Citizens are in process, always becoming, as the commonwealth itself is always becoming,

both now and not yet, searching for those not yet present, working to gather all together for good.

Citizens of God's commonwealth are open to the unknown, the unexpected, the messy, the unpredictable – even when it seems at first to be negative, BAD, WRONG, PAINFUL – we remain open, allowing the mystery of life to disclose itself to us on its own terms and in its own time.

Welcoming children as a primary stance of the Christian faith always means engaging the world as it is – even in its imperfection, while at the same time imagining and working to bring into existence all the goodness that could be, but is not yet. It means loving each other to the point of vulnerability, with hope, in the face of everything in ourselves and in our world that is and remains broken and unresolved.