

SERMON 9.19.21**Seventeenth Sunday After Pentecost, Proper 20****Psalm 54****James 3:13-4:3, 7-8a****Mark 9:30-37**

As the children's minister, my preaching subtext is always how "welcoming children" is a "primary stance of the Christian faith." But once every three years, I get to preach on that AS THE ACTUAL TEXT. This Sunday is my second time doing so.

Ah! How different the world was way back in 2018!

As I reflected on that difference and what the text has to say to us this year, I found myself thinking about chaos – about how "welcoming children" includes welcoming chaos.

Even the most well-behaved child brings an element of chaos into our lives. The more children, the more chaos. One paradigm of this kind of "gentle" or "semi-controlled chaos" is the children's Christmas pageant – where an excess of glitter, the improbable pink kosher pig, and the probability of the unexpected are all part of the joy. This kind of chaos is easy to welcome.

But children bring less gentle chaos also – and our love for them exposes us to loss. There is always some amount of chaos in our lives or the world or both – as we hear in today’s other readings and the prayers.

A little bit of chaos goes a long way, though, and while we expect some, it can be challenging to really “welcome” chaos.

And after more than a year and a half of a level of external, sustained chaos few of us have experienced – even those with a very high tolerance for chaos are beginning to feel the cumulative strain.

A little chaos can spark humor and creativity, bringing people together in new ways, but this kind of sustained chaos can leave us careening between extremes of rage and fear on the one hand and hopeless paralysis on the other.

CAN WE “WELCOME” THIS KIND OF CHAOS?

CAN WE FIND GOOD NEWS – OR EVEN A SIGN OF GOD – IN THIS?

Scripture itself is always a good place to start.

Three of the four Gospels tell the story we hear today. As is often the case with the synoptic gospels, Luke's version is almost identical to what we heard in Mark, and Matthew's version is a little different, conflating what both Mark and Luke tell as a separate incident. (Luke 9:46-48, Matthew 18:1-5).

In all three, Jesus is trying to explain to the disciples what's about to happen: "The son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him, and three days after being killed, he will rise again."

Pretty important stuff.

But as usual, the disciples aren't paying attention and so don't understand. Instead, they're arguing with each other about which of them is the greatest.

The piece that we don't hear in today's gospel is another vital piece of what Jesus has to tell us about children and the kingdom of

heaven – that children are the key to “entering” the kingdom of heaven.

What happens is that the disciples are trying to keep the children from pestering Jesus for a blessing, which they think will keep him from his important work. Jesus “indignantly” rebukes them, saying, “Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it” (Mark 10:13-16 and Luke 18:15-17)

Matthew conflates what we hear today and this, in his version, Jesus says:

“Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me.”

Matthew shows us most clearly the connection between “welcoming” children, how very different Christian leadership is from the world’s idea of leadership, and that “entering” or “receiving” the kingdom of God is not about what happens when we die, but a way of talking about how we live – what it means to

be a “citizen of the earth,” in God’s commonwealth of love and justice.

Although we are not all called to parent or teach children, we ALL DO need to understand what children are really like, and not to idealize them – because welcoming children – actual children and the chaos they bring – is welcoming God, the Divine, Reality.

Do children reveal this to us in ways that even others who have seen reality from the “underside” and the margins cannot?

I think the answer is yes. Three years ago, when we explored the text together, I talked about the first – that all of us were once children.

The past year and half of chaos invites us to explore the second – that, in contrast to most other markers of identity, childhood is a temporary category.

Welcoming the chaos that children bring is also welcoming the chaos within ourselves. And I suspect that the ability to welcome chaos is also a product of accepting the temporary nature of the

world and our lives in the world. Somehow, the temporary or transient nature of childhood is connected to welcoming chaos as a way of becoming spiritually mature adults.

Humans are hard-wired to create stability, even as we work for positive change. Our God is the one who brings order out of chaos. And even when we experience chaos in our lives, we understand it as transitional, perhaps extremely painful, but temporary – in contrast to the stability we're working toward.

But perhaps our WHOLE lives have really always been intended as "temporary" in the way that childhood is temporary.

Think of the people of God in the desert. Living in tents. Staying only so long as the spirit of God remained stationary. Ready to pack up and move whenever and wherever the spirit of God led them.

Think of Jesus' own life – with less permanence or stability than a fox's den or a bird's nest.

Perhaps the stance of "welcoming" this kind of transience, a level of disorder that is far beyond the homey chaos of the Christmas

pageant, is necessary if we are to re-ground ourselves in our foundation of original blessing.

Paradoxically, it seems, we must “welcome” children in this way, in order to grow into spiritually mature adults, capable of living as responsible and compassionate citizens in God’s commonwealth of love and justice, caring for each other and the ocelot and the owl and the whole earth.

Perhaps it is only through such welcoming that we will be able to “pay attention” and “not turn away” from those inconvenient others on our doorstep whose presence reveals how much more work we have to do – but also that we can do that work, that we are actually designed for exactly that work!

As we learn to welcome children in this way – welcoming the ungentle and uncontrollable chaos, and all that is temporary – perhaps we will realize that there is indeed a place and role for everyone and everything in God’s commonwealth; we will learn the humility that recognizes all as beloved; we will do the justice necessary to share resources; BECAUSE despite our ignorance, as we welcome chaos – in children, in the world, in ourselves – our

capacity to love others as we have been loved by God continues to expand, transformationally.

Perhaps.

AMEN.