

Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost, Year B
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St. Mark's Episcopal Church | Milwaukee, Wisconsin
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Our Gospel this morning is kicking us off with that most excellent of New Testament literary devices: contrast. We've heard about the contrast in the immortal omnipotent God being made mortal in Jesus of Nazareth, we've heard the parables like that of the mustard seed being the smallest of all seeds and it's growing into the grandest of all shrubbery (I can't help but think of the knights who say ni in that one), and now we hear of Jesus' secret purpose, to bring to fulfillment God's hope for humanity, to reconcile in the face of sin and death we God's creation through Jesus' suffering, death, and resurrection, and in the face of this profundity the disciples respond with the question, "hey Jesus... who's your favorite?"

I can almost hear Christ's facepalm in response to the high school popularity politics of his chosen disciples as our story proceeds with another poignant example of contrast used to teach us something. This is of course the contrasting image of these grown men being asked to sit around Jesus and to learn from a child. Now, I can imagine Joseph and Jesus' momma Mary wondering what their 30-year-old desert wandering prophet son knows about working with kids. But I'd be lying if I didn't get goosebumps anytime I read that bit of scripture: And Jesus took a little child and put it among himself and the disciples; and taking it in his arms, he said to them, "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me."

It's as sobering an image as any, I think, imagining those disciples being reminded that this whole following Jesus thing never was nor ever will be about being the best or the greatest. Rather, following Christ has always been about something bigger and more important: that is, the joy of serving and loving others.

I think Jesus serves his disciples and us well by showing how important this child he brings into their midst is. At the very least for Jesus' time, for adults children were not exactly considered the people who would help you get ahead in this world. As one commentary puts it, "children are the classic image of the powerless, those without claim, and without the capacity to reward or repay." At least from an economic or societal perspective, children aren't exactly the most powerful.

But Jesus is illustrating to his disciples and us, again through contrast, that our world's notion of power is a little bit busted. Because let's remember that in the face of the disciples' petty arguments of who has the most power, who is the favorite, who is the greatest, is this child being served by Jesus. That is, if we take our faith seriously, before the disciples sits a child being served by God. The same God whose power was made manifest in the creation of the world, in Job's imagery of wrestling the leviathan and the behemoth whose infinite power stretches from alpha to omega that is so fearfully and grandly realized in the images of Revelation, it is this power that is subservient to a kid. A child, nameless and small likely more interested in the 1st

century equivalent of paw-patrol than in the god-man Jesus and his disciples, yet it is this toddler to whom Jesus promises his service, service which will ultimately lead him to death on a cross.

In this story, Jesus says that children, that is, those who are unable to return kindness or investment with money or power or fame, are infinitely valuable to God. Jesus shows that the disciples' very question of who is the greatest is inconsequential, no rather it is a distraction from the truth that greatness does not come from societal gain but rather from the act of loving one another. Especially from loving those who are incapable of granting some false reward.

The directive of Jesus is to welcome the powerless; those incapable of giving a reward for good deeds and just works. Yet also, I think Jesus is subtly reminding us that we are each of us in our different ways as powerless as that child, and he reminds us of our need to welcome and serve one another.

Certainly, we adults are not kids, my bald head can testify to that. We are not like children because we each accumulate power over the course of our lives. We grow up, we learn, we earn money, we gain skills, we develop relationships and we gain experience. Such are the tools we gain with which to serve each other. Yet I am convinced that no matter what trivial power we gather, we are each of us blindly walking into the future; learning with the same dazzling ignorance and if we're aware, potential wonderment as a child. We will each of us encounter hardship and loss, the first death of a parent or security in a job as we will each be surprised and delighted by good works, unexpected gifts or letters and by good and everyday friendship.

We are each of us as prone to pettiness as the disciples yet are also as fortunate as them to be supported by Christ, present in the service we offer one another.

So may we welcome children. May we welcome the powerless. May we welcome the young and the poor, the rich and the old, the tired and the happy and one another. May we know that we are each of us not unlike children, and may that awareness provoke us towards love. Amen.