

PENTECOST 16B/LECTIONARY 25

September 20, 2009

Abiding Peace Lutheran Church – Budd Lake, NJ

Jeremiah 11:18—20 Psalm 54 James 3:13—4:3, 7—8a **Mark 9:30—37**

I think most of you know that John Mark and I just returned from a two-week Disney vacation. We spent a week on the Disney Magic cruise ship and another week in the resorts and amusement parks.

When Walt Disney first came up with the idea for a theme park in California, his original idea was a place where the employees of his Burbank studios could take their families. This vision eventually grew into a much larger dream, a place where all parents and their children could have fun together. His vision became reality in 1955 with the opening of Disneyland. So popular was Disneyland that a second park opened in Florida in 1971, and the vision continued to expand... The Disney theme parks now number eleven, in places as far-flung as Hong Kong, Tokyo, and Paris.¹

Several times throughout this vacation people asked us, “How many children do you have?” while looking around in puzzlement, as if our children would somehow miraculously appear from thin air. Many found it hard to believe that we – a childless couple – would choose to spend a vacation in such a child-centric environment.

As John Mark and I were leaving Disney World on Thursday, our bus to the airport made a stop at another resort where we watched a family stepping off the bus ahead of us, just arriving to start their vacation. There were five of them: father, mother, two little stair-step boys – probably 6 and 4 – and a baby in the mother's arms. I looked at John, pointed at them, and said, “That isn't a vacation – that’s an act of self-sacrificial love for those children.”

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It may be hard for us to imagine, but things were very different in Jesus' time. These days – when many parents' schedules revolve around getting the kids to school, lessons, sports, play dates, and in general providing absolutely everything imaginable or possible – it's hard to imagine how very different attitudes towards children were 2,000 years ago.

Today's Gospel lesson centers around a dispute amongst the disciples: Who among them was the greatest? First Jesus sits down – the posture of a teacher – and says to them: “Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.”² Then, to illustrate his point, Jesus takes a little child and places him in their midst, and he says: “Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.”³

Usually when we look at these passages where Jesus uses a child to illustrate his teaching, we think that he's referring to the youthful innocence that this child represents. But this is not always the case. One commentator explains it this way:

The shocking element in this episode cannot be appreciated by modern readers. Our social conventions have exalted childhood as a privileged time of innocence, this romantic view is usually imported into these passages.

However, the child in antiquity was a non-person. Children should have been with the women, not hanging around the teacher and his students. To say that those who receive Jesus receive God does not constitute a problem. A person's emissary was commonly understood to be like the one who sent him. But to insist that receiving a child might have some value for male disciples is almost inconceivable. ...

This example treats the child, who was socially invisible, as the stand-in for Jesus. It suggests that the greatness or desire to be "first" being disputed among the disciples involved which one would be Jesus' representative. ... The opening words, "first must be last of all and servant of all," hint that the death Jesus predicted was a sign of his own self-offering on behalf of all. Since the child in question may have been a household slave, there is no likeness between such a figure and Jesus or God. ...

[When] Jesus demands that the child be received “in my name” ... [the disciples] are challenged ... to receive someone as inconsequential as a child.⁴

In Jesus' time, children were quite often viewed as little more than property, as were women, cattle, and anything else a man “owned.” They had no social status at all. So, in effect, Jesus was challenging what the disciples believed about how one becomes “great.” Greatness is not by gaining honor, says Jesus, but it is by giving honor to others. Greatness is not about having authority over others; greatness is measured by how one serves others – specifically, those whom society considers inconsequential, the non-people of society.

This teaching of Jesus', then, is not about achieving the innocence of a child; this teaching is about hospitality. And it's not just a question of hospitality toward children; it's a question of our hospitality toward all those whom society places on the margins. Another commentator put it like this:

Membership within the community of the faithful will involve giving status to those who have none. Accepting such an unimportant member of society in Jesus' name is equivalent to accepting Jesus. And accepting Jesus is equivalent to accepting God. Hospitality, a major aspect of life in the ancient world, is to be extended to the most unlikely, thus challenging traditional notions of status.⁵

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It seems fitting that today we celebrate the entrance of a new child of God into the community of the faithful. In this baptism that we celebrate today, Kirsten Emma is going to receive a new status. She's going to be named and claimed as a child of God.

Even as Kirsten's parents bring her forward to receive this wonderful gift from God, there are also things that Kirsten's parents will promise: to take her to worship, place the Bible in her hands, and teach her The Ten Commandments, The Lord's Prayer, and The Apostle's Creed.

And as Kirsten is taught, she will no doubt have many lessons to teach her elders. There is still something special about that youthful innocence and trust that many of us wizened – and sometimes hardened – adults could learn from.

In the book *Children in the Worshiping Community*, the authors talk about many aspects of worship where children can teach adults. One specific example concerns the sacraments, Baptism and Communion, our pure gifts from God. The authors say:

When children partake of bread and wine the "tables are turned." Their participation in the sacrament of the Lord's Table teaches the rest of the church something very important about God and our relationship with God. We are prevented from a gnostic practice of our religion. The essence of gnostic religion is the right knowledge of certain secrets; thus is the path to salvation. The Lord's Supper and baptism are meant as gifts to be received in faith. We do not claim God's gifts through our superior intellect or knowledge of certain secrets kept from others. When children have the audacity to receive God's gifts, which they could in no way deserve on the basis of their knowledge or experience, the rest of the church can learn again the meaning of trust and faith. In the matter of a "right practice" of the sacraments, it is possible that the children shall lead us.

Properly speaking, we do not "observe" the sacraments, we "celebrate" them! We celebrate grace freely given, received by unworthy but grateful people. Baptism and communion are joyous, happy occasions. It could well be that children, who are good at celebrating, will lead us in our participation in the joyful feast.⁶

Amen.

[1,285 words]

¹ <http://www.justdisney.com/disneyland/history.html>, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Walt_Disney

² Mark 9:35

³ Mark 9:37

⁴ PHEME PERKINS, "Mark" in *New Interpreters' Bible, Vol. VIII: New Testament Articles, Matthew, Mark* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 637.

⁵ DONALD H. JUEL, *Augsburg Commentary on the New Testament: Mark* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2000), 133-4.

⁶ VIRGINIA THOMAS and DAVID NG, *Children in the Worshipping Community* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1981), 30.