

WELCOME THE CHILD

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Lamington Presbyterian Church

September 23, 2018; 25th Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year B

Psalm 1; Mark 9:30-37

***“Whoever welcomes one such child
in my name welcomes me...”***

Mark 9:37

A family was seated in a restaurant. The server took the order from the adults, then turned to their young son. “What will you have, young man?”, she asked.

“I want a hot dog.”

“No hot dog,” the mother interrupted. “Give him the boneless chicken fillet, the mashed potatoes, some vegetables...”

Ignoring her, the server turned to the boy. “Ketchup or mustard?”, she asked.

“Ketchup,” he replied, a happy smile on his face.

“Comin’ right up,” the server said, and headed off for the kitchen.

Among the adults at the table, there was stunned silence. After a few moments, the boy turned to his parents. “Know what?” he said. “She thinks I’m real.”

Jesus thought children were real. Today’s reading from Mark makes that very clear.

The disciples are arguing among themselves over which of them is the greatest. (Isn't that what all arguments are about, when it comes right down to it?)

When Jesus hears about this, he calls the Twelve together in the house in Capernaum where they're staying. He sits down — the classic signal, in that culture, that he's about to begin teaching. The twelve disciples gather 'round him, standing, and the other followers around them — all of them expecting a learned discourse on the scriptures.

Yet Jesus gives them no lecture. His message is much more down-to-earth:

“Whoever among you wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.”

Then Jesus calls over a little child. He takes the child into his arms and says,

“Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.”

“Welcome the child” is what he says. That's Jesus' teaching, his antidote for false, petty pride.

In the society of Jesus' day welcoming another person was more than a social pleasantry. It was an unmistakable gesture of respect.

Social status was a preoccupation in first-century Galilee and Judea — as it is in every culture. Everyone occupied one social level or another. Elders, scribes

and Pharisees commanded the highest respect, followed by ordinary male citizens. Then came those who occupied the lower rungs of the ladder: women and slaves. Below them, almost an afterthought, were the children.

The question of who welcomed (or received) whom was a clear indicator of status. Something like that is true even today. If you walk into an executive's office, will that important personage greet you warmly, maybe even walk out from behind the desk to shake your hand? Or do you rate only a curt, businesslike conversation across the desktop?

Imagine the disciples' surprise when Jesus turns not to the twelve (those who belong to his inner circle), and not even to the other Jewish men there gathered — but to a child. The Lord embraces the little one — maybe even takes the child on his lap — and says, “Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me.”

It's an unforgettable object-lesson, a living example of humility and service.

We don't need that sort of example here in America, though — *do we?* This is the land where all men — and women we'd quickly add, in this century — are created equal. We have no system of social caste (as they do in certain parts of

Hindu India). We have no landed gentry (as they do in England). Everybody here in the good old U.S.A. is on the same basis, right?

Believe that one and I'll tell you another.

We have more subtle ways of differentiating one category of people from another: of asking, as Jesus' disciples did, who is the greatest?

We still have the sad residue of racism, for example. All those news stories about racial profiling, about the police pulling certain cars over on the road, and questioning the person behind the wheel for the suspicious behavior of "driving while black" — are a clear indicator that we still have a long way to go.

I remember, in our former community, there was an elderly woman who was a member of our church. For the last years of her life she had a live-in caregiver in her home, a woman from Jamaica whom she loved very much. That health-care aide — whose permanent home was in New York City — had a twelve-year-old son. The kid was a little big for his age. One sunny summer day, he came down on the train to visit his mother. As he was walking from the train station to the house where she worked, a police officer pulled up beside him in his squad car and asked him what he was doing in the neighborhood. A neighbor had seen an African-American kid walking down the street and figured he had to be up to no good. So the neighbor called the police. The police responded, as they have to do, and the

officer quickly realized there was nothing to it, but the fact that it happened at all is proof that some people still ask the question “Who is the greatest?” and answer it by means of skin pigmentation.

Then there’s personal wealth. That’s a clear indicator of greatness, isn’t it? There’s that question people ask, when they want to know how much money another person has: “What are they worth?”

I’ve always thought the wording of that question is very unfortunate: and revealing. In the eyes of God, you know, a person who has millions in property and investments is not actually worth any more — is not an intrinsically better person — than someone of more modest means. We all know the old saying, “You can’t take it with you.” Before the judgment seat of God, I guarantee you: the question, “Who is the greatest?” will not be answered in terms of how many digits there may be, west of the decimal point.

Then there are all those subtle indicators of social status having to do with personal achievement: the job titles; the degree from this or that prestigious university; the square footage and location of one’s office; membership in some professional society. Do any of these really indicate who is the greatest, in a spiritual sense?

The thing that really astounds me, though, is what goes on in airports. The simple act of boarding a plane, these days, is elaborately choreographed according to frequent flyer points. Some airlines now have multiple levels of preferential treatment.

“We’d like to welcome our platinum passengers today.” I see them walking by, in that special carpeted lane marked off by the velvet ropes, and I have to tell you something I’ve noticed: *they don’t look like they’re made of platinum.*

All this is just to say that — for those first-century disciples, as it is for us — we have this tendency within us to keep asking that question, “Who is the greatest?” and to come up with all the wrong answers.

The right answer, according to today’s Gospel lesson, is exactly what Jesus did. He welcomed the child. He took the person in the room who had zero wealth or social status — no basis on which to make the claim “I’m the greatest” — and gave to that one his blessing.

We seek to do that in the church, you know: with our Sunday School program. We make a special place for children in our congregational life. We welcome them here, as worshipers: and when they go out to their Sunday School

classes, they get the loving attention of some very special people, who give of their time and talents to teach them what it means to be a Christian.

There were some children in our church every night this past week. They're the children of our Interfaith Hospitality Network families. We provide them with meals and a place to sleep, as their parents are getting back up their feet financially, after losing a job or experiencing a health-care crisis that led them to become homeless. Nearly all the families in the program are families with young children. The members of our church who answer the call to cook dinner or serve as overnight hosts are very literally welcoming the child. It's a beautiful thing to do.

There's another way, though, to welcome the child: and this gets very personal. I'm speaking of welcoming the child within.

I'm sure you've all heard the phrase, "the inner child." It's one of those pop-psychology expressions that goes in and out of fashion, depending on which self-help book is on the bestseller list.

There's something to it, though. We like to think of childhood as an idyllic interlude, a time of few worries and a great many simple pleasures. But that's not a realistic picture, for most of us. Growing up can be difficult, and sometimes there's

pain and suffering along the way. Sometimes, when we're young, there are important people in our lives — parents, teachers, neighbors, friends — who cause us pain, or who lead us to feel inadequate or embarrassed about who we are.

Life in the “land of the giants” can be difficult. Most of us manage, on the way to adulthood, to come to terms with those negative experiences, but sometimes the pain lingers, just below the surface. Sometimes the wounded, inner child emerges. Then we find ourselves responding to others with unexpected anger or sadness.

Those who work in the field of addiction treatment have learned something about those who grow up in households where one or more parent is an alcoholic, or has other addictions. The pain and confusion of growing up with an addicted parent can be profound. Sometimes the kids grow up to become addicts themselves. But sometimes they take the opposite direction, as adults, and become — frankly — control freaks. Adult children of alcoholics can become super-conscientious: organizing the hell out of their lives — literally. On the surface, they may appear successful and in control, but in reality, that little child who's terrified of chaos lives within them still.

The remarkable thing about the so-called “adult child” phenomenon is that it can arise out of many more situations than alcoholism. Alcoholism is only one

way families can be dysfunctional. Indeed, some have remarked that every family is dysfunctional in some way, and every person has some of that hurting child within them.

Part of our spiritual journey of adults is learning to welcome the child within. Many of us need to find a way to make peace with our own negative experiences as children, the ways we were hurt and wronged by parents or other authority-figures. Some of us find it helpful to work with a counselor or therapist along these lines, delving deep into our psyches, asking God to heal the painful memories that restrict our freedom, even today.

The truth is, there's a part of every adult that feels like that little child in Capernaum, long ago. Out of the terrifying press of the crowd, the "giants" looming over us, the confusion and the fear, there comes a gentle voice of welcome. It is pure, unconditional acceptance. It is our Lord, calling us to him — calling us to be healed and whole, to be loved, to have the tears wiped from our faces.

So, I encourage you to welcome the child, in every sense: to welcome *all* the children in your life, whether here in the church or in your own family; to welcome other children with whom you may come in contact: and yes, even to welcome that hurting, fearful child who lives, nearly forgotten, deep within yourself. Welcome

the child — and let that child come to the Lord Jesus, who is waiting with open arms.

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