

Thomas R. Cook
St. Stephen's Church – Edina, Minnesota
9:00 and 11:00 a.m. Celebrations of the Holy Eucharist
The Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost – September 20, 2015

“Like a Child”

Scripture: Mark 9:30-37; 17 Pentecost B (Proper 20)

So what is it about a little child that makes it so suitable for teaching about the Kingdom of Heaven? As if right on cue, while Jesus is teaching his followers very privately in someone's home, a child shows up. Jesus scoops up the little one, cradles her or him right there in his arms, and tells his disciples, basically, *This is greatness! A little child. You welcome them, you honor them, you do the same to me.* He chose a little child...

I suppose we might imagine some angelic vision of the happy little one resting peaceably there in Jesus' arms with a bit of a glow all around, a gentle smile, maybe a little halo atop her head. But maybe not. In my experience, unless that child is practically asleep, he or she is probably wiggling to get out of there, wondering what the fuss is all about, who all these big people are, why he had been plucked up from whatever he was doing. Come on! Kids are kids. When they are really little, they spit up on you right after you have dressed up for an evening out. They take naps all day when you have to work, and then they wake up about the time your head hits the pillow for a night's rest. They are the center of their own little worlds. They can

indeed be precious, but they are also demanding, dependent, even selfish. And when they get a little older, it really gets fun. They learn the word, “No!” Tantrums become a means to an end. And certainly *they* did not eat the cookies before dinner... despite the crumbs you can see stuck to the corners of their mouths. All things are tested with little ones; all things are at risk, like manners, respect, responsibilities. And *this* is the image of greatness that Jesus holds before his disciples... before us? A little child?

Now, I’m not trying to be too hard on children, but sometimes they hardly seem an ideal image for the peaceable Kingdom of Heaven. What is it about them that makes them so important, so central to Jesus’ teaching of what the Kingdom of Heaven is like?

Well, I don’t think it is because they are so attractive or cute. I don’t think it is because they are always kind and passive. I don’t think it is because they stir in us a sort of natural instinct that makes us coo and giggle at babies or wonder at the developing skills of the pre-schooler. I don’t think it is because they dwell in a sort of perfection that comes with their childhood innocence. Maybe all these things have something to do with it, but I think something else is at work here. There is another attribute that Jesus recognizes in children that makes them ideal images of who Jesus is and what the Kingdom of Heaven might be like, and it is this...

Children are essentially powerless. They need us. They need to be loved. They cannot force their claims upon us; they cannot pay us for what we do for them. In fact, when each of us comes into this world as little children, we are entirely dependent upon the goodness of others, and we learn quickly and innately the value of relationship and the necessity of the help others give us. Of course we wield some influence as children; we can cry or smile or try to get our way, but, in the end, there is a kind of natural humility about a little child. We are dependent for a time upon the good graces of others. But this dependence isn't based upon some unnatural weakness, rather it is a life-giving dependence, completely natural to who and what we are, a dependence that carries us through a period of growth and learning, and prepares us for the responsible use of power in the life ahead.

When Jesus teaches his apostles that, "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all..." and then holds a child before them and says something like, "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and not only me, but God...", he is teaching that to be great in the Kingdom of Heaven means to be as humble and unassuming and reasonably dependant as a little child, and to welcome into community and communion, those like them: the powerless, the voiceless, the one who needs us. It is just such a one that we, the Church, are called to serve.

I know the Scriptures teach us that we are created in the image of God, but sometimes I think we are not like God at all. Even Jesus' closest friends missed the whole point of his life when they argued with one another over who was the "greatest" among them. People did not understand that he was calling them to serve the powerless, to speak for the voiceless, to care for the downtrodden. To be humble, to know we are dependent upon God and each other for goodness in our lives, to offer love and help to others who need it, to value first what is simple and good... This is greatness in the Kingdom of God.

There once was a father who, along with his son, collected art the world over. For when the son was just a little boy, he drew a picture for his father that became the joy of his life, the center of his heart. And their love of art grew together, and over the years they amassed great masterpieces from around the world. And their collection was the envy of many. But the simple sketch the son had made for his father remained the most meaningful piece of all.

Time went by, and the son was called up to war. He did not survive the fighting, and as his father grieved the loss of his son, the collection of art lost much of its luster for him, but not the simple childhood drawing that started it all.

And when the father died, the art world was abuzz with the possibility of acquiring the great masterpieces from his collection. The day of the auction came, and the first of the paintings was displayed on the block. It was a simple sketch really, clearly made by the hand of an untrained child. The auctioneer announced that it was a drawing by the son of the collector, made when he was a little boy. And the crowd there in the auction house snickered at this scribble of lines amidst the fine masterpieces of the art world. And the only one to bid on the sketch was the gardener who had kept the grounds for the family through all their years, who could bid just a modest sum, a few dollars really.

And the auctioneer cried “Sold!” and the sketch was set aside for the gardener. And immediately the auctioneer announced that the entire art sale was complete. And the crowd murmured in anger and disbelief until it was announced that, by order of the collector, the one who purchased the first simple sketch would be awarded the entire collection.