

Pentecost 17 (20B)
Trinity Parish, Seattle
September 20, 2015

[Jeremiah 11:18-20](#); [Psalm 54](#); [James 3:13-4:3, 7-8a](#); [Mark 9:30-37](#)

This Tuesday will mark the end of summer, and we've just finished a very busy one around here. As much as I have loved every bit of it, I missed not getting any time away. So, that's why Carolyn and I made the decision almost at the last minute to take the Labor Day weekend off. And our little impromptu vacation to the coast of Oregon turned out to be just fantastic – most fun I'd had in a long time! We spent two nights camping in a tent with our four-year-old grandson, Sebastian. Oh, what we learn from being with children!

When our own two children were young, we did a lot of camping. Some of our best vacations were spent in a tent, partly because those were the kind of vacations we could afford, but also because we just loved being in the outdoors. We loved the adventure of sleeping in a tent, and waking up in the woods, cooking breakfast on the Coleman stove, brewing the coffee in a tin pot, sitting around a fire in the evenings talking, telling jokes, eating s'mores. Camping gave us time to be with them in a whole different way and in a totally different mode of being.

It had been a lot of years since Carolyn and I had been camping together, but we decided we should introduce Sebastian to the joys of camping, so we pulled out the camping gear, packed up the car, and off we went. I think we had at least as much fun as he did! And, I have to say, that being with our little guy helps me remember to be joyful and hopeful, keeps me from being quite as serious or as cynical as I might otherwise be. He does put a big smile on my face!

One of the disadvantages of being in a downtown parish here in this part of the city is that we have very few children who are regularly part of our worship and our life together. I'm very grateful for every child and parent of a child who worships here. Their/your presence is an important witness to us of something

very important: the future, yes, but also the present. Children remind us of what it means to be human.

Without children's faces looking up at us, it can become easy to forget just how important it is that we plan for the future of this congregation.

But the sight of children has a way of bringing it all home, just how important our care of this place is, just how important it is that we plan for their future here, and for the future of this community of faith. They put a human face on that future

So, if any of you are thinking about having children, bring 'em on! We want them!

Now I have to believe that in Jesus' day there were lots and lots of children around. After all, this was long before family planning! Even today, when you go to a developing country birthrates are high, and there are kids everywhere! The poorer the country, the more children there usually are, just as was true nearly everywhere before the advent of modern forms of birth control and family planning. We hear stories of crowds following Jesus, but it's easy to imagine that they were all adults until you think about it just a little bit. But there were almost certainly children everywhere!

And frankly, the gospel writers don't seem to pay much attention at all to all the children running around – until we come to this little vignette in today's gospel. The disciples were caught feuding about which one of them was going to be the greatest. And in that context Jesus says: ""Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all." Then [it says] he took a little child and [set him or her right down in the middle of] them; and taking [the child] 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.""

By setting a child in their midst, Jesus used the purest example of what it is to be human, still unencumbered by the bad habits and attitudes and prejudices and competitiveness that we learn as we grow older. There's something about a child that reminds us of what it truly is to be human, to be vulnerable, authentic, undefended, and lacking in pretense or envy or any of the qualities that create division and strife. They don't care what kind of social or racial or economic background you have. They simply accept you for who you are.

When the writer of Mark has Jesus say, “Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me,” it is as if he is saying, “when you see a child, you’re seeing me – the truly human, the totally authentic one.”

Seeing a child helps us see things we cannot otherwise see.

Just a couple of weeks ago it was the sight of a child lying lifeless on a beach in Turkey that awakened the conscience of the world to the plight of Syrian refugees and to the profoundly human dimensions of this growing tragedy. What is it about such a sight of pure vulnerability and danger combined with the innocence of childhood that just rips your heart out? It did mine. This was certainly not the first child who had died – there have been many – and no, we don’t want to see the pictures.

But it is amazing what one picture can do. There are thousands of children who have died that way, but the picture of just one brings it home to us.

Organizations like World Vision or Save the Children know that telling people about the millions of children who are starving in poor countries does nothing but leave us feeling helpless and overwhelmed by the staggering nature of the problem. But the picture of one beautiful little child, big round eyes looking at us, pleading as it were for our help, tugs at the heartstrings and helps us to feel that we just might be able to make a difference for at least one child.

Jesus knew that bringing a child into the midst of the disciples’ petty feud would bring some perspective, cause them to see things differently, and realize the importance of serving one another in their desire to serve God. It would get them out of themselves and give them perspective about what was really important in life and in their relationships with one another. It would remind them of what it really is to be human

One of the most eloquent voices in our society on the importance of children and how we care for them is Marian Wright Edelman, the founder and Director of the Children’s Defense Fund. Several years ago she made this observation about society and what’s really important, which I believe arises from her intense focus on children and their needs, and her observation seems even more true today:

We are living in a time [she says] of unbearable dissonance between promise and performance; between good politics and good policy; between professed and practiced family values; between racial creed and racial deed; between calls for community and rampant individualism and greed; and between our capacity to prevent and alleviate human deprivation and disease and our political and spiritual will to do so.

The inability to get health care because people lack insurance, kills, less traumatically, and less visibly than terrorism, but the result is the same. And poor housing and poor education and low wages kills the spirit and the capacity and the quality of life that all of us deserve. (2001)

Caring for children and for their needs awakens us to what really is important for all of us, which is why Dietrich Bonhoeffer famously said, “The test of the morality of a society is what it does for its children.”

Whether you have children in your life or not, we were all children at one time, and there’s still a piece of that little child in each one of us. Seeing children may in fact remind us – consciously or not – of our own fragility and our own fears. It may be why some people do not like children.

But today Jesus invites each one of us to take a good look at a child – our own, someone else’s, or the one still inside of us – to take a good hard look into their eyes and to feel what it feels like to be that child. When we do, we’ll have regained an important perspective on life, and we just may well be better prepared to live into the fullness of life that God holds out to us.