

Pentecost 18B (9/23/2018)

Jeremiah 11:18-20

Psalm 54

**James 3:13-4:3, 7-8a**

**Mark 9:30-37**

*The one with the lowest standing, the one who offers the lowest return on investment, is Jesus' representative among us. The Teacher inverts our standards for social valuation and holds humble service in the highest esteem. And, letting go of selfish ambition is a pathway to peace, and turning our attention away from ourselves is a mark of freedom.*

Rules for children in the worship service<sup>1</sup>:

One. If you find that you're sitting in front of a child and they can't see, lean to the side.

Two. If the children seated behind you are rustling papers, hand them a crayon.

Three. If there is a baby that is crying, offer to take the baby from their parent and walk to the back of the church and rock the child for a while. The parent really needs a break.

Four. If the teenagers are whispering give them some Smarties. The rustling and crinkling will replace their whispering.

Five. If an adult complains to an usher about the noisy children near them, offer to trade seats with that adult and then apologize to the parents of the children.

Six. When a child is running around giving everyone high-fives during the [passing of the peace] make sure to give them an extra fun high-five, and then high-five the next five adults that you see.

Seven. If a child has worn tap shoes to church and is dancing on the wood portion of the floor, slip the sheet music for "The Entertainer" to the pianist and roll with it.

Eight. When the children can't hear because an adult around them won't take off their puffy jacket and it keeps squeaking and distracting the children, offer to help them off with their jacket and go hang it up for them where it goes.

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<sup>1</sup> Cindy Beal, <https://www.facebook.com/JusticeandPeaceConsulting/>.

Nine. When the three-year-old insists on standing on the front pew turned backwards looking at the rest of the people, give the child a pair of very dark glasses. That will prevent the child from catching any adult's eye, which would lead to distracting them. This will protect the adults who as we know have very short attention spans and are easily distracted.

Ten. When a child in front of you is very squirmy, and then they finally turn around and you realize suddenly, "Oh, it's Jesus!" take it in stride and play Got Your Nose till he turns around to the front again.

Of course, these "rules for children" are tongue-in-cheek; they're actually rules for adults, which taken together serve as a reminder of our priorities as a community rooted in Christ. These rules aim to readjust our attitude toward children, insisting that **the youngest among us are equally worthy participants, wholly members of the worshiping body with singular gifts to offer.**

Unfortunately, our default approach to children often treats them as partially formed members, future disciples whose immaturity we tolerate until they learn to worship properly, that is, according to our expectations for proper worship. I recently came across an especially cringe-worthy example of this attitude in action, almost unbelievable for its inhospitality. A parent worshiping with his child at an unnamed congregation received a card in the middle of the service that read: "Thank you for being committed to being in church with your child. In order to allow those seated near you to engage in the message, please enjoy the remainder of the service in our lobby. A Connection Team Member will assist you." More like a *Disconnection* Team Member, amirite? And people wonder why that nice family with the cute kids stopped coming to church....

In this case, we have a pretty clear answer to the question, "What would Jesus do?" "Taking [a little child] in his arms, he said to them, 'Whoever welcomes one

such child in my name welcomes me....” **Jesus is famous for relating to children even and especially when others disregard them, but we’re likely to miss the radical nature of this gesture if we project our own romanticized views of childhood onto the first-century narrative.** As one interpreter explains, we tend to privilege the portrait of “gentle Jesus, meek and mild,” so we domesticate him as a benign playmate. For this reason, the scene in our Gospel from Mark today may come across as “just another ‘cute’ story about Jesus and little children.”<sup>2</sup>

But, childhood was viewed much differently in Jesus’ context than it is now. Children were not held in high regard in the first-century world; they were not the beneficiaries of their parents’ every sacrifice; they were not considered worthy of the community’s investment for the sake of their future lives. No, **children were possessions of their fathers, and not yet whole persons;**<sup>3</sup> **they had no inherent rights or privileges; they had no higher social standing than servants. Children would have been expected to stay out of sight, and not to interfere with the rabbi and his students.**<sup>4</sup> **That Jesus would focus the disciples’ attention on a nameless child, therefore, is highly unusual.**

**Even more unthinkable is his suggestion that the disciples should attend to this child as they would the Teacher himself.** There is nothing to be gained by relating to a child, much less extending kindness to her.<sup>5</sup> So, Jesus’ call to welcome children in his name is not simply an affirmation of the virtue of childhood, but a radical challenge to conventional social relations. **“Whoever wants to be first must**

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<sup>2</sup> Nathan G. Jennings, in *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, Vol. 4, 93.

<sup>3</sup> Martha L. Moore-Keish, in *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, Vol. 4, 96.

<sup>4</sup> PHEME PERKINS, *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, Vol. VIII, 637.

<sup>5</sup> Susan E. Hylan, <http://members.newproclamation.com/commentary.php?d8m=9&d8d=20&d8y=2015>.

**be last of all and servant of all,” that is, *Do away with selfish ambition; forget your preoccupation with greatness according to the world’s standards; look instead to the interests of the invisible person in your midst. That’s the true test of greatness.***

And, Jesus isn’t just shooting from the hip. His alternative definition of greatness is modeled on the incarnation itself. **The God of cradle and cross – the God who shares our embodied life – demonstrates greatness not by standing above us, mere creatures, but by standing beside us. God’s greatness is not about self-promotion and separation, but relationship and solidarity.**<sup>6</sup>

Dear church, **the one with the lowest standing, the one who offers the lowest return on investment, is Jesus’ representative among us. The Teacher inverts our standards for social valuation and holds humble service in the highest esteem. And, his alternative vision for our shared life is both a challenge and a gift. When we internalize God’s claim on our lives and affirm our God-given identity, the pressure to prove our own worthiness is released. And, in this way, letting go of selfish ambition is a pathway to peace, and turning our attention away from ourselves and toward the most vulnerable is a mark of freedom.**

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<sup>6</sup> See Karoline Lewis, “The Greatest,” <http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=5223>.