

Message for the Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost, Year B (9/19/2021)

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

Mark 9:30-37

Have you ever heard of a “playground”? The concept was originally developed, or at least popularized, by Pastor Andrea Roske-Metcalf at Grace Lutheran Church in Apple Valley, Minnesota. It’s simple, yet powerful: a designated child-friendly area within a larger worship space – kid-size chairs, toys, books – all in proximity to the main event, not separate from it. Here’s how Erica Schemper describes the model playground:

1) There are toys. Good toys. Perhaps, even, better toys than the nursery. It’s a place intended for play, and not necessarily for play that directly correlates to worship....

2) It’s in the sanctuary. Not in the Narthex. Not in a room separated by a window....

3) And, in fact, it’s in a pretty visible place in the congregation. The ideal for me? Up front, between where the bulk of the congregation is sitting and the chancel area, because this gives clear sight lines to the kids, which is essential, and also because this means that people in the congregation see the kids playing.

4) And [in addition to creating the space, it’s important that] the congregation has done the work to start developing a culture where they don’t just tolerate but welcome kids in church. And by welcome, I mean that they actively encourage and support parents in their decision to have their children present in worship even when their children behave like children.¹

The purpose of a playground, in other words, is to help shape our attitude toward children in church by affirming that **the youngest among us**

¹ youngclergywomen.org/jesus-put-kids-worship/.

are equally worthy participants, wholly members of the worshiping assembly 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. We usually exhibit that attitude in subtle ways, although on occasion I come across an especially cringe-worthy example. Some years ago, for instance, a parent worshiping with his child at an unnamed congregation was handed 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, if you ask me. And people wonder why that nice family with the cute kids stopped coming to church.

On this topic, scripture gives a pretty clear answer to the question, “What would Jesus do?” “Taking [a little child] in his arms, he said to [the disciples], ‘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 liable to miss the radical nature of this gesture if we project our own romanticized views of childhood onto the first-century context.** As one interpreter explains, we tend to privilege the portrait

of “gentle Jesus, meek and mild,” so the scene in our Gospel from Mark today may come across as “just another ‘cute’ story about Jesus and little children.”²

But, childhood meant something very different in Jesus’ day than it does now. Children were not held in high regard in the first-century world. They were not the beneficiaries of their parents’ every sacrifice, neither were they considered worthy of the community’s investment. Children were the possession of their fathers, and not yet whole persons;³ they had no inherent rights or privileges; they had no higher status than servants. Children would have been expected to stay out of sight, and definitely not to interfere with a rabbi and his students.⁴ So, it’s highly unusual that Jesus would focus the disciples’ attention on a child.

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, let alone extending kindness to her.⁵ And for this reason, Jesus’ call to welcome children in his name is a radical challenge to conventional social relations: “Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.” Or, to paraphrase: ***Do away with selfish ambition; forget your preoccupation with social standing; look instead to the interests of the invisible person in your midst. That’s the true test of greatness.***

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

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

⁴ Pheme Perkins, *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, Vol. VIII, 637.

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

And, he isn't just making this stuff up; Jesus' alternative definition of greatness is modeled on the incarnation itself. **The God of cradle and cross – the God who shares our flesh-and-blood existence – that God demonstrates greatness not by standing above us, but by standing beside us. God's greatness is not about separation and hierarchy, but rather relationship and solidarity.**⁶

Friends, the one with the lowest rank, the one who offers the lowest return on investment, is the embodiment of Jesus among us. The Teacher inverts our standards for social valuation and holds humble service in the highest esteem. No doubt in our cultural context this alternative vision for our life together is a challenge, but it's also a gift. **When we acknowledge God's claim on our lives and internalize the fundamental dignity that claim implies, the pressure to prove our own worthiness is released. And, letting go of selfish ambition, we freely turn our attention to the ones who are otherwise overlooked.**

⁶ See Karoline Lewis, "The Greatest," www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=5223.