

Welcoming a Child

Mark 9:30-37

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

Friday morning I was in the locker room at the YMCA and saw a friend from the synagogue. We chatted a bit, then he remarked that "tonight we begin the new year." Then I remembered that it was Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year. As I walked out to my car, I thought about new years. What is our new year? Is it January 1? Is it Advent, the beginning of the Christian liturgical year? Then I thought: Of course...for us as a community, the first Sunday in October is the new year. That is when Covenant and Community Members who so decide will make their commitments for another year to the inward and outward journeys of following Jesus.

During these days, the Church of the Covenant really ceases to exist. It goes into hiding, if you will, as we all consider whether or not we will commit to another year. Actually, everyone de-commits during this time of preparation and reflection. We start back at the beginning. Why is it important? Because being Jesus' community cannot be a matter of habit or wanting to perpetuate ourselves as a church organization. Jesus calls us to follow him in the way of the cross and resurrection. The response needs always to be with a clear willingness, even eagerness, to center our lives on discipleship and the leading of God's spirit. It is much better NOT to make that re-commitment than to do it half-heartedly or without doing the things we say we are committing to.

The life of following Jesus is not imposed on us. Jesus never said to anyone, "Follow me, or else!" He invited. He called. He extended the invitation to be part of what he called God's kingdom, life as it is meant to be, as God created it. No one HAD to get up and follow. In last week's reading from Mark, Jesus said to the disciples and the crowd, "If anyone wants to become my follower, then let that person take up their cross and follow me." If you choose to do this, then it will mean a journey of faith taken with your whole being.

I listened to the gospel reading for today with the ears of one who is reflecting on my own re-commitment along with others doing the same. The disciples are on a journey with Jesus. It is an outward journey, going from place to place, teaching, helping, healing, feeding. More importantly, it is an inward journey. The disciples have made their commitments. They have gotten up and followed Jesus, left their old lives behind. Yet it is clear that they do not understand what it all means. They do not understand what they are to do or where they are going, so they need to have teachable hearts and minds. Christian spiritual life is a commitment of our whole life to following Jesus. And that means having a constant openness to learning what that means all along the way.

As they walk along, Jesus continues to talk about the way of suffering, death, and resurrection. The disciples do not understand it and it scares them. They are afraid to ask him what he means. Maybe they are afraid Jesus will think they really are stupid! However, sometimes you know just enough about something to know that if you know any more, it will involve YOU, will challenge and change your own life. That might be why they don't want to ask Jesus what he means.

I want to say something that may sound very strange. It is important that, as we take up the journey of faith, we realize that we DO NOT KNOW what Jesus is talking about. To THINK that we know is to abandon our lives as a journey of faith and make it all about having answers, head knowledge. Everything in scripture tells us it is about our whole lives, the way we live, the ways we are called to die and be reborn, to let go of some things so that we can receive new life, to be willing to let the old self die and be awakened to our new, true self. To commit ourselves to the journey of faith is to not know where we are going. It is to be in the process of our rebirth, our waking up to who we really are as children of God, our transformation into the persons God created us to be. And that means paying attention every day, being open to learning what it is about.

When they get to their lodgings for the night, Jesus asks the disciples: What were you talking about on the way? Oops! Nothing is hidden with Jesus. Everything is out in the open. But it's for our own good, our own healing, so we can look honestly at ourselves and learn a better way, get insight into ourselves. They were arguing about which of them was the greatest. Competition. Ego needs. Hierarchy. Being better than someone else. Always needing attention and having to be affirmed. All the things ingrained in us since childhood that never deliver the satisfaction they promise. We think feeling superior or better than someone else will give our

lives meaning, and for a little while it may. Then we see how empty it is. When we are always measuring our lives against others, we don't know our own hearts, our own minds, our own inner sense of meaning and purpose. We've beaten one competitor after another, defeated one enemy after another, piled up achievement awards one after another. Yet there persists within us a deeper need that is not touched by any of that.

Instead of berating the disciples, Jesus sees an opportunity to teach them something very important, a whole different and truly meaningful way to live. Picture this. Jesus and the disciples have been offered hospitality by a family in Capernaum. They are talking together after dinner, before they turn in for the night. When the red-faced disciples confess what they were arguing about, Jesus says: "Look, it is not about being great or taking first place or having some kind of status. It is about servanthood, about the joy and freedom that comes from NOT being caught up in those things." Then he reaches over and takes the hand of a little child who lives in that house. He lifts the child up on his lap and says: "Look, if you are able to receive a small child like this, you've got it made! You are welcoming me, as well. And if you are welcoming me, you are welcoming God who sent me."

What is it about "receiving" a small child? Children had no power or status in those days, in that culture, OTHER than carrying on the generations. We haven't changed that much. Children are still mostly ignored and are seen only as future adults. We basically don't see children as having something to offer AS CHILDREN. We see only their potential, what they might contribute to the church or the society when they grow up.

In the spiritual realm, children are slowly being recognized as having a spiritual life! Some who work closely with children, like Sofia Cavalletti, have seen that children not only have a spiritual life, but that they are probably closer to God than we adults are. They are more open, yet unspoiled by the culture, and, we must say, by the church and religion.

So, children don't advance our own power, like hanging around important and powerful people with influence and money and so forth. Children are kind of a drag. But Jesus turns all of that around, blows it all out of the water. He makes "receiving a child" the gateway to our relationship with him and to God. The word translated "receive" means to welcome someone, like a guest coming to your home. It means truly BEING WITH that person. So when we welcome a child in this way, we drop all of that ego stuff, that competition stuff. We are liberated from all of that. It opens our hearts wide and clears our minds. It helps us along the way of this cross and resurrection stuff, this dying and rising stuff. It makes it real.

At the Disciples General Assembly in August, I helped Kaye with the children each evening during worship. Well, I'm still not sure it was worship, in my view. There was this huge stage and musicians and speakers are up there in what often felt like a performance. Meanwhile, we were down in front of the stage, sitting on mats on the floor, with 25 or 30 children. I helped them pick out crayons, paper, glue sticks, pipe cleaners, whatever they wanted to work with. Some would come over to show me what they had done. In the beginning I thought, Gee, I'd like to be more a part of what's going on up there on the stage or be able to pay more attention to the music or speeches. Soon, however, I realized I was right where I preferred to be, that there was something so real, so deeply joyful about being with those children. To me it was the gateway to Jesus, to God, to the kingdom, and to my truest self.

When our children were small, I would take them out for a walk each afternoon when I got home from work. We would take the little red wagon for little Shelley to ride in, and Kent would meander a little bit ahead. We would stop to inspect each and every thing that caught Kent's eye. As we walked, I could feel the tension and stress of the day's encounters and complications dropping away. And all of it began to seem so unimportant. I had allowed many things to distract me and clutter my mind and heart. Being with small children unclutters our inner life and teaches us again how to pay attention. And when we pay attention, we learn, we grow, we enter the kingdom of God, which was right there all the time.

So, three things from today's gospel story. First, making a decision to follow Jesus on this inward and outward journey of faith needs to be made afresh, without a sense of compulsion, but in complete freedom. It needs to be real and made with our whole lives. Second, once we make that decision, that commitment, we acknowledge the not-knowing, not-understanding, that opens us to what Jesus can teach us every day of our lives, if we pay attention. Third, we remember whenever we are around a child--here is a gateway to Jesus, to God, to the kingdom. It all has to do with the dying of our old, deluded, insecure and grasping self, and the awakening of who we truly are as God made us to be and live.