

## STATUS

### *Sermon for Pentecost 17—Mk 9:30-37*

LPC, 9/20/15

Welcome the child. Who would not welcome a child? Today we welcome children wholeheartedly at Lawrencefield Church. We are, in fact, thrilled when someone shows up with children. We have a large room downstairs special furnished to welcome children. We are blessed to have an extraordinarily gifted Sunday School superintendent whose very nature is to welcome children. When the children join us in worship we make room for them. We even smile indulgently if they make noise, as children do. Usually the parents are far more disturbed than the rest of the congregation.

We love little children. We not only love them for their own sake but we treasure them for what they represent. When we see children in the pews we see a future for Lawrencefield Parish Church. Fairly or unfairly, we attach to these little ones the hope that this institution we love so much will not die with us.

Jesus says, in today's Gospel lesson, that welcoming a child in his name is tantamount to welcoming Christ himself, and not just Jesus Christ, but the almighty God in all his power and wholeness. Because we here love and welcome children we may hear this and congratulate ourselves that we are already, at least in this one regard, fulfilling the will of God.

At this point we must consider the context of what Jesus is really saying in this passage. Jesus has revealed to his disciples that he himself, the long-awaited Messiah, is to be betrayed and killed, and will rise again. As we heard last week, this was not welcome news to them. Peter in particular disputes with Jesus on this point. Jesus rebukes Peter, saying that those who want to follow must take up their cross as Jesus takes up his own

And here, in today's story, not long afterward, Jesus' disciples are disputing who among them is greatest. Discovering this is for Jesus something like what it would be like for an AA convener to discover that some people at the meeting are sneaking off to the restroom with a bottle of Jose Cuervo. In other words, this type of competitive behavior among the disciples is just about as far away as you can get with what Jesus has been trying to teach. So Jesus calls a halt and conducts a remedial lesson.

The essence of Jesus' lesson seems like an oxymoron – a contradiction in terms. Whoever wants to be first must be last. Whoever wants to be greatest must be everyone's slave. Please know that that although the word is here translated servant, in this time and place there was little distinction between servants and slaves. Servants, for all intents and purposes, were totally subject to their masters. By comparing discipleship to servanthood, Jesus is prescribing a type of humility that would have been unthinkable, if not insulting, to anybody who has any status at all. In other words, you can't follow Jesus and worry about your status.

It's in this context that Jesus brings in the child as an archetype of Christian discipleship. Jesus is not holding up the ideal of childhood as we understand it today. First-century Palestine had zero romantic notions about the Age of Innocence and the enviability of childhood energy

and enthusiasm. The poor anonymous child in this story is not presented as an emblem of innocence and energy but as an extreme example of status-less-ness.

Children in first-century Palestine, until they became old enough to contribute to the family economy, had no status. Now of course, their parents might love them, but society as a whole valued children primarily as proleptic adults. And the hardness of life sometimes made even that potential value expendable.

Thus is Jesus' message much more radical than first appears. To be great in following Jesus you must be willing to be expendable, just as Jesus allows himself to be expendable. Ego, status, and self-promotion have no place in Christian discipleship.

There are two practical applications of this notion that I'd like to suggest this morning. The first is obvious. Have some humility. Do not think of yourself as greater than you are. As a matter of fact, it's great if you can develop a habit of recognizing egocentric behavior in yourself and have a strategy for nipping it in the bud. These strategies can even be light-hearted, a way of laughing at yourself, but the important thing is to interrupt those egotistical sound loops in your brain.

Here are some clues you've fallen into an egotistical time warp:

- You keep replaying a conversation in your mind, or maybe the conversation you should have had.
- You start to feel resentful at being underappreciated.
- You mentally stand yourself up beside someone else whom you believe you have outperformed but who has been rewarded more than you have been.

Here are some strategies for interrupting those loops:

- Use the "Jesus Prayer": "Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me."
- Use a self-forgiving prayer like this one from Francis DeSales: "Poor heart! So soon fallen again into the snare! Well now, rise up again bravely and fall no more."
- Do something kind for someone else.
- Contemplate a crucifix.

The other application suggested by Jesus' example of the child is to stand, figuratively or literally, with those thought to be of no account: the poor, or people who have little status. A valuable exercise in this regard is to consider the people you personally tend to discount: Democrats? Republicans? Or maybe particular Democrats or Republicans: Barack Obama? Donald Trump? Until we can see ourselves standing in common humanity with people we have held to be of no account, we will not know fully what Jesus means about receiving a child as himself, or what Jesus means by taking up our own cross.

Here's the good news: we ourselves are the little children Jesus of Nazareth welcomes, and considers his equals before God.