

Church on the Mall
August 23, 2015
Rev. Sarah A. Colwill
James 3:13-4:3, 7-8a
Mark 9:30-37

“Float Like a Butterfly, Sting Like a Bee”

I spent four years of my life in Louisville, Kentucky when I was attending seminary. During that time, I became familiar with a hometown hero, first introduced to me as Cassius Clay. This charming, attractive, strong man was beloved by this town, who was proud to claim him as their own. We know him better as Muhammad Ali, the name he took when he converted to Islam. The title of this passage in Mark in one of the study Bibles I use is, “Who Is the Greatest?” Like a good Louisvillian, my first answer was – Muhammad Ali. He is known for calling himself “The Greatest”. The heavyweight boxing champ was not too fond of humility. He is quoted as saying, “My only fault is that I don’t realize how great I really am.”

However, he is also quoted as saying, “To be able to give away riches is mandatory if you wish to possess them. This is the only way that you will truly be rich.” And, “It’s a lack of faith that makes people afraid of meeting challenges, and I believed in myself.” But my favorite of his has to be, “If they can make penicillin out of moldy bread, they can sure make something out of you.” Muhammad Ali was an outstanding boxer, a very charming man, arrogant for sure, but he believed in himself and accomplished much.

The disciples are walking with Jesus to Capernaum. The scene they are leaving involved a boy that suffered from convulsions. The disciples were unsuccessful at curing the boy and have to call on a frustrated Jesus to heal him. Jesus said to the disciples, “You faithless generation, how much longer must I be among you? How much longer must I put up with you? Bring him to me.” Jesus then healed the boy who the disciples themselves were unable to heal. As they left that healing and that scene, Jesus tells them again what we heard last week – that he would undergo great suffering and die, and after his death, rise again. We are told they didn’t understand, but were too afraid to ask any questions.

With this as our background, we can see why Jesus would be so upset about the conversation the disciples were having among themselves as they walked to Capernaum in our reading this morning. Were they trying to figure out why they couldn’t heal the boy? What they needed to do differently next time? Were they discussing with themselves what Jesus was talking about in this his second iteration of his death and resurrection? Were they trying to make sense of what they didn’t understand? No, turns out they were discussing who among them was the greatest. Like young boys heading off the field of a Little League victory, they were retelling their star plays and one-upping each other.

To be arguing with one another about who was the greatest – which is how the author of Mark describes it, sounds pretty immature and childish. But we do similar things, just in less suspecting ways. We are clever enough to mask our boasting or our

competing in different ways. Walk into a Presbytery meeting where pastors gather and you will hear chatter about worship attendance numbers, how many new members joined that year, or how successfully their stewardship campaign is going. All to the glory of God, we say – a clever way to mask boasting. This reminds me of a favorite story in Luke 18 that Jesus tells that goes like this: “Two men when up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee, standing by himself, was praying thus, ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.’ But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast and saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, a sinner!’ I tell you this man went down to his home justified rather than the other; for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted.”

We have clever ways to mask our boasting. Being thankful like that Pharisee that we aren’t like other people. We look to half-hearted disciples, or people with no faith. We look at people who are unemployed, or those who work for less than reputable corporations, and we perhaps feel a little better about ourselves because, well, at least we’re not one of them. This is what we have been nurtured to do in our society – not just to be good at something, but to be better than someone else – competition is part of our DNA as Americans. This argument that the disciples are having on the road is an argument that surrounds us in our lives – as we hope to get promotions at work, or as we try-out for certain roles or spots on a team: we live in a “who is the greatest?” world.

Jesus' response to the disciples is to give them a way out of that world. They don't need to be competing with one another about who is the greatest. This is not the way of God's kingdom and they don't need to keep competing. Their worth in the world is not dependent upon being better than someone else. Jesus takes that burden of self-promotion and points their focus beyond themselves. Rather than look so inward at our individual accomplishments, he points their focus outward onto a child. "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all...Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me."

Children, we are told in Galatians, are not of much more worth than slaves. Our culture has glamorized childrearing to the point where we probably have images of pastel baby blankets, sweet lullabies, and peaceful, loving giggles pop in our minds when we think about children. But most of you know, and certainly as was the truth back when Jesus was talking – babies are work; they are messy, loud, dirty, and a strain on resources. They are unable to contribute to the household or society. Welcoming children does not increase your bottom line or gain some other useful skill or talent.

Welcoming such a child, we are told, is welcoming Christ, which is welcoming God. What does it mean to welcome a child? The Greek word used here in the text is "dechomahee" which means to receive in a welcoming way, or to receive with ready reception what is offered. The word implies a high level of self-involvement. We can also translate the word to mean – to receive favorably, give ear to, embrace, make one's

own. There is an element of acceptance in this word; when we welcome someone in this way, we are accepting of who they are and including them as part of us.

This is not a distant pleasantry being exchanged, as if to just have good manners, but this is an act of vulnerability, opening oneself up to another and accepting them for who they are as one of us. It is what we aim to do every Sunday morning with whoever walks into this sanctuary – new guests, old friends, young and old, long-time members, or people off the streets. This is what we mean when we say, “Everyone is welcome; especially you.”

As Christians, our hearts are pulled towards children. Still they remain on the top of the list for vulnerability – unable to defend themselves or provide what they need to survive, they are totally dependent upon others. Churches and charities work worldwide to be an advocate for this often helpless demographic. From food programs to public education to health care to orphanages to foster care – the church is right to work to defend and support and uplift this often neglected group of innocents.

As the Christian church, even in a time when children were seen as liabilities and not much more than slaves, Jesus was embracing children, saying – let them come to me. Early on, the church included children into the family of faith: it is not an adults-only affair. Religious experiences are for them, too, as they are welcomed into the fold at birth. This is one of the reasons for infant baptism – it is an acknowledgement that from the beginning, the child is claimed as God’s own and an important, equal member of Christ’s church.

The challenge on how to include children in churches remains a bit of a moving target as we transition out of the booming Sunday school programs of the last century and into the low involvement of young parents that we are experiencing in this century. While we may long for those bustling classrooms of yesterday, we all know we can't go back and live in the past, but more importantly, something about them was not self-sustaining, or they would still exist today. If those Sunday school programs worked perfectly, they would still be on-going. They fit a need at that time and place, and while the intent is still important, the execution needs to adapt to today's culture.

There is also one important lesson that we can learn from the Sunday school programs that are no longer booming: living a Christian faith is more than getting an education. You can know the Bible inside and out and still not be a Christian. Acquiring knowledge is only part of the equation. As parents and adults, we want our children and the children who are part of this church to be knowledgeable about our faith history – our stories shape who we are and give us our identity. The Bible teaches us how to live our lives and reveals the nature of God through Jesus Christ. There is no doubt that this kind of teaching is crucial to the faith. But it needs to go hand and hand with practice and living in a Christian community.

Whenever children come to our services, I can see the longing in your hearts to teach these youth about our faith. It warms my heart to see your desire to educate our young ones and show them the love God has for them through Jesus Christ. That is part of the equation that is not where we wish it would be. But there is this whole other part

of the equation that we are doing so well, that needs to be uplifted. When children grace our presence, you beam. Your eyes light up. The nurturer in almost every single one of you comes out and your excitement is visible. You welcome children the way that Jesus is talking about in this passage. You acknowledge them, look them in the eye, greet them with a warm Christian greeting, and do what you can to accommodate their needs. From a coloring table in the back, to juice boxes, and children's bulletins, you are doing everything you can think of to make them feel welcome.

This may not seem like a big deal, but it is! You are providing for these youth a safe, warm, sacred place where they belong and where they feel loved. They won't be twenty years old before they can articulate that, but this sanctuary is a place of rest and safe haven where they can experience firsthand God's gifts for them: grace, mercy, unconditional love and belonging. They hear the Scriptures, sing the doxology, and might even catch a thought or two from the sermon. They have a whole family of faith to call their own, after hard weeks at school or rough times at home, here they have an abundance of love.

I want to say one more thing about this passage where I believe Jesus is pushing us a bit here this morning. His insistence that those Israelites welcome a child, was not just about children, but about welcoming all who are vulnerable, left behind, and seen as less-than. He pushes us to accept and receive those who we may prefer to keep out – whether that be because of their age, or their status in life, or because they don't have good hygiene, or we don't like their political views.

We heed Jesus' advice to welcome children as well as all those forgotten by the world who God still claims and loves and accepts as his own. As the body of Christ in the world, we welcome all people – young and old, rich and poor, healthy and sick, those with good, clean pasts and those with criminal records, those who make good decision and those who make poor ones: We are a place of welcome and love for even the least of these. This passage has broad-reaching implications that encourages us not just to welcome children, but to welcome all the world's vulnerable with acceptance and hospitality. May we continue to strive to be that kind of church in a world that needs desperately to know God's love and belonging. Thanks be to God. Amen.