

Jeremiah 11:18-20

Psalm 1

[James 3:13-18](#)

Mark 9:30-37

Sermon for September 19, 2021

A CHILD'S INNOCENCE

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Summary: First, make the tree good.

As some of you know, I'm not a great fan of little children. The words that are often used to talk about or to communicate with children – words like 'cute,' 'adorable,' 'oochie-coochie' – are simply not a functioning part of my vocabulary. When parents or grandparents inflict pictures of their infant children or grandchildren on me, I smile and make appropriate noises out of civility rather than any shared aesthetic appreciation, and I would prefer walking barefoot over hot coals to spending more than a few minutes helping a little girl decorate her dollhouse or a little boy scoop up legos with his toy dump truck. All in all, while I acknowledge their necessity in the grand biological scheme of things, I nonetheless find myself relatively impervious to their charm.

And yet I must acknowledge that Jesus, on more than one occasion, uses little children to illustrate something about the character and quality of life he's looking to inculcate in his followers. Thus elsewhere in Mark's gospel, we're told about an occasion when Jesus was ministering to a crowd of people.

Then they brought little children to him that he might touch them; but the disciples rebuked those who brought them. But when Jesus saw it, he was greatly displeased and said to them, "Let the little children come to me, and do not forbid them. Assuredly I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will by no means enter it." And he took them up in his arms, laid his hands on them, and blessed them. (Mark 10: 13-16.)

So it's very clear that there is something about children – or more accurately, about *little* children – that Jesus wanted his followers to register and emulate, and

I'm pretty sure he wasn't referring to how cute or adorable they are. But then what was he referring to?

To get at least a partial answer, we have to look at the context to which Jesus is using the little child to present a contrast. Let me read the relevant verses again:

9:33 Then they came to Capernaum; and when he was in the house he asked them, "What were you arguing about on the way?"

9:34 But they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another who was the greatest.

9:35 He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all."

9:36 Then he took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms, he said to them,

9:37 "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me."

The context here is one involving his disciples' behavior and attitude. The small group of Jesus and his followers were walking on the road from someplace in Galilee, probably some village where Jesus had been preaching and ministering, and now they were returning to their headquarter city of Capernaum. Jesus may have been walking in front of the group, or perhaps lingering behind, but in any event he was close enough to hear at least the tone of what the others were saying to each other, but far enough so that he could claim not to have heard them clearly. When they reach the house where they were staying in Capernaum, and while they're settling in there, maybe eating supper, Jesus asks them what they were quarreling about. When they don't answer, he takes a little child and uses it to offer his instruction. It might be worth mentioning that it was probably Peter's house, since that's where they usually headquartered in Capernaum, so it was quite likely one of Peter's children that Jesus chooses to make his point.

What we're going to do is look at three elements of that behavior and attitude, and see how they differ from the behavior and attitude of little children.

The first thing we notice is that the disciples were disputing with each other, rather than bringing their disagreement to Jesus.

No one denies that little children may find themselves in conflict with one another. One little boy grabs the toy dump truck, and the other little boy starts to cry because that's the toy he wanted to play with. But when Dad is present, both little

boys will turn to him for an authoritative decision. Children instinctively recognize when there is someone of greater wisdom and authority available, and automatically turn to that individual to settle their dispute.

Mark just says that they were arguing about who was the greatest, but Matthew, in his account of the same episode, tells us that they were arguing about who was the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. Here they had among them someone who was the literal incarnate King of heaven, but instead of turning to him, they were contesting the issue among themselves.

Imagine two members of a book discussion group, who are engaged in a heated debate about what message the author of the book was trying to communicate, when the author herself is another member of the group. Or imagine two hikers on a wilderness excursion fiercely debating whether to take the path to the right or the path to the left, when the wilderness guide they have hired for the excursion is standing right there with them.

In matters of spiritual importance in the conduct of the Christian life, whether it's an individual arguing with himself or Christians arguing with each other, it's important to recognize from the beginning that Jesus is our guide through the wilderness of the world, that Jesus Himself is the author of creation. Whenever we come to a fork in the road in our own lives or our own Christian fellowship, it is vital to remember that we are not left to our own devices, to our own powers of reasoning or our own strength. As Christians, we are to live by faith in someone older and wiser than ourselves, just as little children live by faith in their mother.

And consider next what they were arguing about: who was the greatest. What was important for them was to establish a comparative ranking amongst themselves. They were focused on how to enhance their own prestige, rather than to help each other.

Perhaps nothing shows so well as this episode how far the disciples were from realizing and incorporating into themselves the real meaning of Jesus' Messiahship. He has just finished telling them what awaited him in Jerusalem, and yet they were still thinking of the Kingdom in earthly terms, and of themselves as his chief ministers of state. There is something almost heartbreaking in the thought of Jesus going towards a cross in the service of others, and his disciples still arguing about who would be the greatest.

There's a commercial running on TV lately that illustrates pretty well I think why Jesus held up a little child and talked about what true greatest means in the kingdom of heaven. I may not have the details right, but what the commercial shows is two little girls sitting on the floor with some toys and candies between them. The adult voiceover asks them to show who likes dolls best, and they both race to grab a doll. Then the voice asks which likes candy best, and they both race to grab a piece of candy. Then the voice asks which likes to share best, and the two little girls hesitate a moment, thinking, and then slowly hand whatever they've gathered to the other little girl.

Every economic problem would be solved if people lived for what they could do for others and not for what they could do for themselves. Every political problem would be solved, if the highest ambition of men and women was to serve each other and not to enhance their own prestige. And the divisions and disputes that tear the church apart would for the most part never occur if the only desire of its office bearers and its members was to serve the kingdom of heaven without caring what position they occupied.

Next time you're around a little child playing with a toy or eating a piece of cake, try this experiment. Say something along the lines of, "Boy, that looks like a beautiful doll. I wish I had a doll like that." Or "That cake look delicious. I wish I had a piece of cake like you." I'll wager that, nine times out of ten, you'll soon be holding the doll yourself, or sharing whatever remains of the cake.

And the final element of the episode that sets the stage for Christ's instruction is the fact that when Jesus asks them what they were arguing about, they're afraid to answer him.

Now little children, when they're scolded for doing something their parents regard as wrong, will often respond with what looks like contrition, and then stop what they've been doing. That's one of the ways parents teach children what's right and what's wrong. (I'm speaking as an observer, not from first-hand experience!) So when Jesus holds up the little child as an example to contrast with the behavior of his disciples, it isn't because children never do anything wrong.

I think what Jesus is illustrating is that little children – toddlers – don't seek to *hide* their behavior from their parents. Toddlers are not conflicted, in the sense necessary for deception. Their behavior, whether good or bad, is all out in the open.

There's an old piece of moralizing to the effect that you should lead your life as if your mother was always watching you. And that's fine as far as it goes, unless you happen to have a mother who abandoned you as a child, or a mother who's a terrorist suicide bomber.

A much wiser, universal piece of advice, I think, is the one suggested by our Lord's instruction in today's Gospel reading: Lead your life in such a way that you would not hesitate to tell Jesus about it.

The Jews had a notion of something called the Book of Life, and elements of that notion have found their way into Christianity as well. It's the idea that everything we do, say, or think is being recorded, and that that permanent record will somehow provide the evidence for some future trial.

But that seems to me to be an entirely wrongheaded way of understanding God's concern for the way we lead our lives. That would be like imagining parents keeping a complete record of everything their child does, with separate columns for good and bad things. And then when they reach maturity, the parents take out the ledger, tote up the good and the bad, and decide on that basis how they're going to treat the child from then on. That's not the way parenting works; that's not the way love works.

Jesus concludes his instruction by saying, "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me."

What he's doing is not threatening them with his own judgment. What he's doing is offering them an ideal towards which to strive, an ideal in which their own behavior, their own attitudes, even their own thoughts flow, without conflict, from their own Christlike nature. To welcome Christ is to welcome his nature as the basis and model of our own, and then strive to manifest his nature in the particular circumstances of our own lives, and thereby to become as innocent as a child, not in his eyes, but in our own.

And so that is our prayer for this morning, heavenly father, to become mature in our own innocence, and to accept as our guide towards that heavenly destination, not standards of the world's rankings, but the quality of Christ's own spirit, and we ask in his precious name.