

# Jordan Station United Church

September 19, 2021

Creation Week 2 – 17<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost

Rev. Anita Spiller

Sermon: “Jesus Said, “Kids Matter!”

(Mark 9:30-37)

This week, the passage is jam packed. In seven short lines Jesus tells the disciples he is going to die, the disciples get into a big fight about who is better and he declares that kids matter. Jesus has passed through Galilee on his way to Capernaum again travelling along the road with his disciples. The conversation goes something like this...Hey guys guess what...I'm going to die. This is the second time he has had this conversation, the second passion prediction in the Gospel of Mark. There is a third one which is coming up in a couple of weeks so stay tuned for that. This prediction isn't as overt as some of the other Gospel that specifically talk about crucifixion...Mark speaks instead of Jesus being betrayed into human hands. A reminder that Jesus will no longer be in God's hands but at the mercy of humans and chief priests. This is an ongoing conversation between Jesus and the disciples. Along the way, however the disciples were arguing about who is the greatest...haven't you had that conversation with your friends recently...I'm better than you. I caught more fish than you. Seems strange no, that they were arguing about who is better? The question posed here is not about who is better but what is central to discipleship. And further still, what do children have to do with it. Are children disciples?

Imagine the moment when Jesus welcomed a child. The one who is powerless. The one that has no authority or relevance. In this time and this culture children were not important. They were never even noticed. But Jesus looked out for the child, paid attention to the smallest and the least important. And in this moment when the disciples are talking about who is greater Jesus says...wait a minute it's not you...it's a child. Oh and by the way... despite what most people think, Kids matter. They are indeed disciples, perhaps the greatest disciples of all.

Images of Jesus embracing cherub-faced children have filled our churches, media and art galleries for centuries. Many preachers will claim this week that Mark's gospel is not really about children. They might say that it is about misidentified power; it's about an upside-down kingdom; it's about the scandal of the cross and the way of discipleship. But it is worth stopping and reflecting for a

moment on how we understand the discipleship of children in the church and what it means to introduce them to the habit and lifelong practice of Christian worship. Children, as we know, have a great capacity for imaginative engagement with the world around them. They readily enter the world created by a good story (and they usually know a good story from a not-so-good one). Children need to hear the Bible's stories in worship—not because they will understand them better there, but because that is where the stories do their formative work, shaping a child week after week, season after season, year after year.

I have never been a big fan of children's time when we only teach about morals. Encouraging children to "be good," "be helpful," "be nice to their brother". Don't get me wrong, those are all good things, but it minimizes Scripture's real purpose and power, and we fail to communicate to our children that in worship—in the hearing of the Word, the preaching of it, the performance of it through gestures, song and prayer—they (along with us) enter that world and have the hope of being transformed through time—God's time—by its vision and power.

In the scripture today, Jesus shows us that children are integral to the whole worshipping body; that their presence should not merely be tolerated but happily anticipated. So, the debate rages on about how then do we cater worship for children. I would argue that this is not the way to proceed.

It is important that we worship with children but we should not make it simplest or minimalistic. Worship that seeks above all else to enact God's story of redemption and to imagine God's dream of peace invites and expects the participation of the whole community of faith—young and old, rich and poor, the able and the infirm—with the understanding that, in regard to young children especially, there are privileges reserved for their maturity, mysteries and riches of the worshipping life that reveal themselves as rewards for years of practice and perseverance.

Finally, we engage in the work of introducing children to worship—and overseeing their ongoing participation in it—not in an effort to make them good but that they might know who they are. And we do this with the hope that worship which is attentive to the gospel's grand story will do its transforming work in their lives (and ours), will feed their imaginations and help them (and us) learn about how God continues to create for us and in us.

Then he took a little child and put it among them; and taking her in his arms, he said to them, "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me."

The disciples were squabbling about rank, and Jesus brought in a child to make a point about what it means to be a disciple. First and foremost, it means to welcome the other. And what a point. Because he didn't say that whoever welcomes a child does the work of the faithful. Or serves God well. Or gets brownie points. Whoever welcomes the child welcomes Jesus. And thereby welcomes God. Opens up the doors wide as wide can be and asks God to be at home. That's powerful. There's nothing in this passage about education or behaviour. No support for parents or questions about anything at all, really. It's just about welcome. And the amazing nearness of God.

Welcome is vital for Christian community. It's being open to others, being aware of their comfort – or discomfort – with a situation and setting aside our own priorities to offer them love and comfort. If nothing else, that's what we should be teaching kids in Sunday School.

And, of course, it's bigger than children. Just as Jesus expanded the concept of "neighbour" to include, well, everyone who needs us, I think he'll back me up if I argue that "children" means everyone. Everyone who is smaller and weaker or needy and hungry, and maybe less courageous, or lonely, or struggling, or tired, or sad. Which sounds like the whole boatload of us, doesn't it? We all need a welcome. We all need to feel at home.

It is my prayer for this week that we will all know that each of us is called to be a disciple. Christ has no body but ours. We are called to be Christ's hands and feet in the world. To throw open the doors and welcome everyone we meet. In this season of creation. Let us create a world where all are welcome. All are welcome in this place. Thanks be to God, Amen