

# SITTING IN GOD'S LAP

Mark 9:30-37

Sunday, September 20, 2009

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I once had a friend, who then became my enemy, who then became my friend again. It was all very childish. I was in the wrong and he was in the wrong and we held onto that sense of being wronged as if it were a precious gift.

This friend – enemy - friend lived just around the corner from me on the Upper West Side. New York is really a village, you know, and so I saw this person far more often than I wanted to. The truth is that I never wanted to see him again! But the Spirit had other plans. One day on my way to the subway, I looked up and there he was coming in the opposite direction. At first I tried the seldom-successful method of pretending like I didn't see him. But then, for whatever reason, I decided that I would look him in the eye and smile and say hello. And so I looked up, smiled and started to speak when all of a sudden... he stuck out his tongue at me. He stuck out his tongue at me! I was completely shell-shocked. "How childish," I muttered after he had passed. And then I went to my office, sat down at my desk, and called everyone I knew to tell them how childish he had been. It would take me awhile to

understand that my tattletelling was also childish. There we were, men in our 30s, giving children a bad name.

It used to be that kids had a bad name just for being kids – not because of any behavior. It is a thoroughly modern construct to elevate children to such a high place in society. For most of human history, children have not been valued. They were not protected. Some might argue that modern times we have overdone it with our emphasis on children as perfect little angels, but we had a lot to make up for.

In the time of Jesus, the abandonment of infants was a normal practice; sometimes used as a postnatal method of birth control, with no particular stigma was attached to it. Infants in ancient Roman society were also abandoned if illegitimacy was suspected or if their parents were too poor to feed them. Weak and vulnerable, they were discarded like trash. Sometimes other people found them and took them home. And sometimes they didn't. It is interesting to note that the early Christians were known for taking these abandoned children into their homes and raising them as their own.

This devaluing of children continued right up through the Middle Ages.

Thomas Aquinas, the influential Christian philosopher and theologian taught that in a raging fire a husband was obliged to save his father first, then his mother, next his wife, and last of all his young child. Not only is the patriarchy shocking, but so is the last place given to children.

And if these human practices were not cruel enough, the ancient world itself was a very harsh place for children. Infant mortality rates sometimes reached 30 percent. Another 30 percent of live births were dead by age six, and 60 percent were dead by age sixteen. Children were always the ones who suffered first from famine, war, disease, and dislocation. And if the parents' died, the kids would likely die as well. Childhood was a time of terror, and survival to adulthood a cause for celebration. (*Malina & Rohrbaugh, Social-Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels*).

Jesus and his disciples had returned to Galilee from Caesarea Philippi, where we left them last week. You might remember that after Peter's confession that Jesus is the Messiah, Jesus told them not to tell anyone. Jesus repeats that warning in today's lesson, seeming determined to not be caught up in the expectations of his disciples or anyone else. And then he repeats the

unwelcome news that he would be killed and raised again, but they still didn't get it. And Mark says that they were afraid to ask him to explain. Perhaps Jesus calling Peter "Satan" just a few days before had put a damper on inquiry. So instead of asking for clarification, they went back to their favorite subject – the coming Reign of Jesus and who was going to be the greatest in the new government.

They arrived in Capernaum and entered a house. Whose house it was we do not know – maybe one of the disciples or a friend. Once they had settled in, Jesus asked them what they had been talking about on the road. They must have been embarrassed, because their awkward silence is palpable, or, as Eugene Peterson translates it in *The Message*, "deafening." (*Kate Huey*) Not receiving an answer, Jesus sat down and asked his disciples to do the same. Sitting was a common way for a Jewish teacher to signal that he or she was about to say something important. So they sat and Jesus said: "*Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.*" And then to show them what he meant so that they would never forget it, he called one of the household children, took her in his arms and said: "*Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.*"

The church loves this sentimentalized image of Jesus loving children, taking children in his arms or calling us to be more like children. But our own modern elevation of children makes the power of this lesson harder for us to understand. This was no Hallmark moment, meant to warm the disciples' hearts. It was a proclamation of Cultural Revolution.

Jesus picked up the child. And in that gesture spoke a thousand words. You see it was Roman custom for the father to pick up the child immediately after it was born. By this action, the father claimed the child as his own and pledged to raise it. If, however, the father doubted the paternity of the child, or if the child was deformed or otherwise unwanted, the father would refuse to pick it up. His refusal meant that the child would be discarded. When Jesus took this child in his arms, his disciples would have understood him to be claiming the child, this weakest one in the society, as his own. And then more shocking still Jesus said: "Whoever welcomes one such child, one such outcast, in my name welcomes me - and not just me but the One who sent me."

These words would have shaken the disciples to their core. And properly understood, this teaching still challenges the dominant culture of our day.

Jesus picked up a child and in doing so declared that people who say they want to find God are often looking in all the wrong places. We look in church and in books and lectures and discussions. But God is found in the faces and names and stories that fill our days. God is found sitting on the steps of this church day in and day out. God is found locked away in prison and forgotten by a society that is more interested in punishment than in the grace of rehabilitation. God is found in the faces of those strangers who come here to work and hope, but who live in fear. God is found in the frightened faces of those who sit in hospital waiting rooms or those persecuted because of sexual orientation or status or ability or the color of their skin. Jesus could have pulled any of them into the circle that day. Jesus could have said of any of them: "When you welcome them, you welcome me and the one who sent me." That is one lesson of the child.

And here is another: While we talk and talk about our responsibilities to the world, sometimes we forget that we are the child. We are the ones afraid and vulnerable and weak and confused. When my friend stuck his tongue out at me, he was giving expression to the fearful, hurt child still alive in him. That fearful child was alive in the disciples that day in Capernaum. They were afraid to ask questions of the teacher, afraid to get the answers wrong. Like

children, they were selfish, arguing about who was going to be first – who was going to win. So Jesus called a child into their midst, someone like them, and held her in her arms and took her onto his lap. And in that child they saw the Good News of the Gospel – that no matter who we are or what we have done, we are held by the Everlasting Arms; the ones that will never let us go. And in that warm embrace we begin to remember who we really are: the dearly loved children of God. Thanks be to God. Amen.