



JESUS AND CHILDREN (Birth–Age 12)

LECTIONARY COMMENTARY

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Lection - Mark 9:33-37 (New Revised Standard Version)

(v. 33) Then they came to Capernaum; and when he was in the house he asked them, “What were you arguing about on the way?” (v. 34) But they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another about who was the greatest. (v. 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.” (v. 36) Then he took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms, he said to them, (v. 37) “Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.”

I. Description of the Liturgical Moment

Jesus has always been closely connected to children. From infants to older children, Jesus has extended himself to them in love, time and time again. He did not strategically maneuver his

ministry on earth away from children—rather, Jesus’ ministry was inclusive of children. Jesus spoke to children, healed children, blessed children, cast demons from children, raised children from the dead, and welcomed children into his warm embrace.

Maybe Jesus can so easily welcome children because he has personal memories of his own childhood experiences. He knew what it was like to be misunderstood and rebuked by his parents. The reaction he received, at age twelve, from his parents when he remained in the temple in Jerusalem without their consent makes this clear. Perhaps Jesus is so welcoming to children because of their innocence, uncluttered faith, and humility. Finally, it could be that Jesus has the ability to see inherent worth and value in everyone, especially children, and, therefore, welcomes children just as they are.

Historically, the African American church has followed Jesus’ example of welcoming children. Not simply regarded as invisible extensions of their parents, children have been encouraged to actively participate in the worship life of the African American community, for they are living, breathing manifestations of God’s creative and ongoing activity in the world.¹ On this Sunday, perhaps more than others, children are warmly welcomed into worship, even taking leadership roles as readers, singers, and in offering prayers.

II. Biblical Interpretation for Preaching and Worship: Mark 9:33-37

Part One: The Contemporary Contexts of the Interpreter

Within the context of 21st century America, children have music, popular culture, technology, violence and sexuality sewn into the fabric of their lives in ways that to date are unparalleled. From perpetual text messaging, Nintendo Wiis, X-boxes, CDs or cellular innovations, it appears that children are inextricably bound to many aspects of popular culture and its values. In many ways, the marriage between children and 21st century culture places children in precarious, fragile, and dangerous places. More than ever, children are abused, snatched, hastily given Ritalin, latch-keyed, under-fed and recipients of inadequate health care. However, what must continue is the welcoming spirit of the African American community, which has always reached out to children in love. This spirit has deep roots within African American history and culture. Now, more than ever, vulnerable children need to be embraced by the church just as Jesus embraced children.

Part Two: Biblical Commentary

After hearing Jesus’ prediction of his impending death, the disciples’ response is intriguing. Due to their lack of understanding, they chose to neither dialogue about the implications of this, nor obtain clarity regarding Jesus’ death. Rather, the disciples proceeded to argue with one another about who would be the greatest in the kingdom. They argued as they walked “on the way,” which not only designates physical movement, but also points to the way of the cross, the way of discipleship, and the way to the kingdom of God.² When Jesus inquired about the argument, the disciples remained silent, which was indicative of their embarrassment upon the realization that as Jesus spoke to them of his own personal self-denial for the sake of others, they spoke of their own notions of elevation for selfish reasons. Quite simply, the disciples had the wrong focus.

At the point at which Jesus sat down, it was clear to all present that he was in teaching mode. He intended to first address the issue at hand—the disciples’ mistaken understanding of greatness. He told the disciples that in order to be first they must be willing to be last of all and servant of all. Contrary to societal notions of the nature of greatness, which was commonly associated with socioeconomic status, human connections, and influence, the importance and prominence of an individual in the kingdom of God was based on a completely different set of principles. God’s kingdom ushers in a new world order which radically reverses normative standards and declares a different definition of discipleship—service to others. The one who is willing to be last of all and servant of all is, in fact, great in God’s kingdom.

In most of Jesus’ parables, the time of instruction is generally a descriptive moment conveyed through words. In this case, however, Jesus engages the disciples in a living parable by using a child to illustrate his position. This move by Jesus is significant for a number of reasons. First, within Greco-Roman culture, children were regarded as insignificant within the fabric of the society.³ There was a reality of marginality and they were, therefore, not welcomed as vital members of society. Second, it would have been quite unorthodox for a person of such import as a religious teacher to use a child within the context of teaching his disciples. Yet, Jesus, not interested in maintaining the status quo, makes a child an active participant in his discipleship lesson. Finally, in a world where status and honor were bound to those with whom one chose to affiliate, Jesus made it clear to all that in his world order he associated himself with the meek and mild, the humble and lowly, the marginalized, and helpless members of society. In so doing, Jesus turns the societal understanding of greatness on its head.

Furthermore, Jesus does not have a detached encounter with the child. He *took* the child, he *put* the child among them, and he *took* the child in his arms. The marginal status of the child as an insignificant and unwelcome member of society in no way kept Jesus from engaging the child through the ministry of inclusion and embrace. He was invested in doing life-changing ministry on the margins, impacting the lives of the lowly who mattered least in society.⁴ “Jesus’ ministry presumes, and even demands, boundary crossings that transform the traditions and institutions over which the leadership has charge and control.”⁵ This child, whom society deemed as lacking in worth, was upheld as having much worth to Jesus. In fact, the child was of so much value to Jesus that he issued a change in the child’s physical and social location from the outside to the inside, from the margin to the center. While existing on the margins, children can be forgotten, ignored and left to figure out the mysteries of life on their own. Yolanda Adams notes this by singing, “What about the children, to ignore is so easy.”⁶ However, it is in the center of human life where children can receive the love, support, and encouragement needed to thrive and grow.

When a child is welcomed, when their innate worth and value are upheld, when they are drawn into the center of life and heart, when they are touched and loved and cared for, Jesus says that he himself is welcomed by such actions. Moreover, when a person welcomes a child in this way, they not only welcome Jesus, but they also welcome God. So, if the church leaves out children, it is leaving out God. If politicians making policies leave out children, they are leaving out God. If culture leaves our children, it is leaving out God. For Jesus, welcoming the powerless essentially welcomes the most powerful One of all.

Celebration

As we reach out and draw children from the margins of society to the center, we welcome them as Jesus has graciously welcomed us, which in turn welcomes the trinity in all of its power, glory and life-changing capacity.

Descriptive Details

The descriptive details in this passage include:

Sounds: The disciples arguing with one another (v. 34); the disciples' silence as they sit in embarrassment regarding the content of their argument (v. 35); Jesus calling the disciples to him; and

Sights: The sight of a small child in comparison to the adults in the house (v. 36); the child being placed in the center (v. 36); and Jesus taking the child into his arms.

Notes

1. Lincoln, Eric C., and Lawrence, H. Mamiya. The Black Church in the African-American Experience. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1990. pp. 309-345.
2. Hooker, Morna D. The Gospel According to Saint Mark. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1991. p. 227.
3. Myers, Ched. Binding the Strong Man: A Political Reading of Mark's Story of Jesus. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1988. pp. 266-71.
4. Blount, Brian K., and Gary W. Charles. Preaching Mark in Two Voices. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002. p. 182.
5. Blount, Brian. Go Preach! Mark's Kingdom Message and the Black Church Today. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1998. p.129.
6. The Lyrics to Yolanda Adams' "What About the Children," found online at All the Lyrics.com. Online location: http://www.allthelyrics.com/lyrics/yolanda_adams/what_about_the_children-lyrics-1271083.html accessed 15 December 2008