

Being Children of God
Year B, Proper 20, September 17, 2006
Rev. Dr. Patrick R. Close

Mark's Gospel presents us with the second passion prediction by Jesus. The disciples are following him to Jerusalem and there is a shift in what is taking. Jesus does fewer miracles now and concentrates on teaching. Jesus speaks again about how he must suffer and die. The emphasis is on the cross. When he speaks, Mark adds that the disciples just don't understand. There is a gulf that exists between the disciples, and their expectations, and Jesus' mission, to do what God wants.

In the midst of all of this, an interesting thing arises. The disciples begin to argue among themselves. The debate is an age old one, "Who's the greatest?" If you are a parent, you know what this is like, the kids are in the back seat of the car and you are on your way somewhere. The kids are fighting in the back seat and your patience wears quite thin! We are still obsessed with being the greatest. Nowadays, we start young. We want our toddlers to get into the best preschool, so they can get into the best school, so they can get into the best college. We want our kids to be the greatest, and in some measure ... this will assure us that we are the greatest.

It is into this argument that Jesus enters. Remember last week? Peter acknowledges that Jesus is the Messiah. Then Jesus speaks about the need for the passion ... and Peter objects! Jesus "rebukes" him ... that's the equivalent of yelling, I think! Whew! Are Peter and the disciples going to be yelled at again this week? No, Jesus is different. He knows that his disciples don't understand him or his mission. It's the same for Jesus' disciples (that's us) today. We don't understand him.

Jesus says that if we want to be first, we must be last and servant of all. What does this radical statement mean? We're Americans! We aren't last to anyone in the world! We don't like to be second because anyone who is second is a loser! For us, we're Philadelphia fans ... unfortunately we don't have much experience with being first! But there is more to what Jesus is saying here. When he speaks, he turns conventional wisdom upside down. Jesus reminds us that God's ways are not the world's ways.

What Jesus does next is astounding. He takes a child to use an object lesson. Now, we need to understand what the child represents. In Jesus' time, children had no status. They ranked somewhere between slaves and women in the culture. Sorry ladies, you didn't have any status either. The child is nobody ... children were not among the greatest in Jesus' time. That was reserved for royalty, clergy, and men folk.

Jesus makes the child the center of attention! I know today that doesn't surprise us, but in his day ... this was unthinkable! Furthermore, Jesus embraces the child! This was not done ... Jesus was a rabbi ... and rabbis don't touch children. This was Jesus' first children's sermon. But it wasn't for kids, but about kids. Jesus uses the child to connect us with God. His teaching says that following him isn't about being the greatest, or being first. For him, the life of a follower is marked by humility and servant hood.

We might do well to ask ourselves who's the "child" today. Jesus was concerned about those who others discarded or ignores. An overwhelming concern for the poor, the sick, the stranger, the friendless and the dispossessed mark his ministry. Can we do anything else than follow

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Jesus' teaching? Who stands at the end of our lines in life today? The list is long, and growing longer all the time.

All we have to do is think about who is suffering and we will begin to come in touch with the children who need our embrace. There are the poor, immigrants and refugees. We don't have to look to Dafur and Lebanon, but only a scant few miles to Camden to find these lost children. The children today are caught up in war as civilians ... bombed by both sides ... forced to flee from their homes and what little bit they have. They are the thousands suffering from AIDS and other illness. The children today are those who live on less than a dollar a day, don't own one pair of shoes and can expect a short life span.

So often we are caught up in the quest to be at the head of the line that we forget to look back and see who's behind us. We are more concerned about "who's in" (where we want to be) and to avoid "who's out" (where we don't want to be!). Jesus' object lesson with the child holds up someone with no status, no power, and no position. Jesus links us forever to God through the child! He redirects our attention and ambitions.

Who's great in the eyes of God? It is those who exhibit the values of humility, service, caring and compassion. The disciple of Jesus is concerned with children. We are to welcome and serve the children of the world (those in need, those with no status). Here's our mission. It's marked by our food ministry to the hungry in Camden with St. Paul's. It's working with the children of Camden in Kid's Alley Café. It's helping St. Andrew's to build a community center in Camden. It's welcoming the people of Mt. Pisgah who were burned out this summer and rebuilding their church. It's helping to build home for people through Habitat for Humanity.

God continually sends us reminders that we need to be caring for God's children in the world. This week I received a letter and from Grace Episcopal Church on Canal Street in New Orleans. Imagine our entire church wiped out, washed away because of Hurricane Katrina. It's a year later and they still haven't recovered. They have sent a letter to every Grace Church asking for help ... and I responded. All it takes is looking at the back of the line to see who's behind us ... and then acting! (At an earlier service, there was a visitor from Grace Church, Ashville, North Carolina ... they got the same letter ... coincidence?!).

Our mission is clear. We are the children of God and we are to care for the children of God. It starts right now, right here with us. We take the children and embrace them. We stop worrying about being first in line and move to the back. We follow Jesus by being humble and serving. It's time to be a child of God and reach out to the others. May God help us in our efforts!