

“CHILDREN & HUGS”
September 20, 2009 Grace Church, Haddonfield, NJ
Rev. Dr. Patrick R. Close

Today’s story in the Gospel of Mark is one of my favorites. Here’s Jesus telling us that greatest has to do with accepting and hugging (and loving) children! What are we meant to learn about being a Christian and a Church hugging kids?

Did anyone see what happened at the Phillies game this week? A dad, Steve Montforto, caught a foul ball hit by Jason Werth. Now ladies, you need to know that men get very excited about catching foul hits ... yes, it’s a guy thing! What happened next was natural for a good father; Steve turned and gave his new treasure to his three-year-old daughter Emily! What a good dad! It’s just like God giving us what we need! What happened next is that Emily turned around and threw the ball over the rail back towards the field!

Steve was in shock and the crowd around them must have made a lot of noise and dismay ... Emily got frightened, and turned to her dad. What do we do when we’re afraid but turn to God. What did Steve do? He hugged his daughter! The foul ball didn’t matter, it was gone, but he wanted to comfort his frightened daughter ... what a great dad! God is like that towards us. God hugs us, loves us and reassures us when we are afraid.

This story just resonated for me. Mark gives us the Lesson of the child, and we are reminded what it means to be a Christian and a Church ... a place where all, especially children are welcomed ... and hugged! What Jesus was trying to teach his disciples, and us today, is that the kingdom of God works differently from the world.

To understand what Jesus is doing, we must understand what’s going on in Mark. Jesus and his disciples are traveling in Galilee. He is teaching them what it means to be a community. Again, Jesus offers what we call a “passion prediction.” Jesus says that he will suffer, be rejected, be killed and rise again! This happens three times in Mark’s Gospel, in chapters 8, 9 & 10. Jesus’ mission is strange and disturbing to the disciples. They don’t understand ... and neither do we. We want heroes that win the game, not die!

While they are traveling, the disciples begin to argue ... you know what that’s like ... its kids arguing in the back of the car on the family trip! The disciples were arguing about who’s the greatest. We know what that is like ... we want to be first in line, we want to be the greatest in the world! Our culture is obsessed with being the greatest, being first ... at the expense of all else.

Jesus finds this a “teachable moment.” Now he can explain to them what his community is all about. It’s not about being first; it’s about being last. Imagine being in the grocery checkout line, and moving to the end of the line so others may go first. It’s a radical new world that Jesus is talking about. Whoever would be great in Jesus’ community must be servant of all! Church is not about making us great, it’s about teaching us how to care about and serve others.

What do we teach here in our Church? Are we living the life that Jesus wants from us? He was concerned with a new kingdom of God that was a community focused not on

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themselves, but on all others. The world teaches us that wealth, power, and status matters most. Our worth is measure by how much we have ... that determines the greatest. Jesus teaches us that community is about love, forgiveness and serving others. In the Kingdom of God, our worth is measured by how much we love! To be great in God’s eyes, we must serve others, especially the least in our midst.

It’s here that Jesus scoops up a child and hugs them. Like the disciples, we don’t understand what it means to be a Christian. Jesus overcomes this by giving us an illustration. He says that this is what the kingdom of God is like ... to accept a child, to embrace them, because when we do, we are embracing and hugging Jesus and God! Take a moment right now ... find a child near you and give them a hug. Now, there were a lot of adults here and they need hugs too, hug an adult near you.

Did you see the changes that just happen? There were smiles and laughter, and you could notice a great transformation in the air around us! This is what Jesus is talking about, about being willing to be different ... to be willing to accept and embrace, to hug, all those who cross our paths!

Now, I must add that there is even deeper significance in the Gospel today. Children in Jesus’ day had not worth, no value. They were less than slaves and women. They had no power, contributed nothing to production, had no status and were voiceless. What Jesus is saying is that our community, our Church, has to be the place that serves, accepts and embraces the least of our times. Jesus’ standard has to become ours, and that is to SERVE OTHERS. Just as Jesus embraced and reached out to the least, so too must we!

Children in Jesus’ day lived in fear and terror. But things haven’t changed much today, have they? I remember a time when my mother pushed me out the door after breakfast and said dinner was at 6, be home by then! It was a place and time when we acted more like a community. As a matter of fact, my mother knew what I had been up to by the time I got home! That’s the kind of accepting and caring world we need now.

Today, we have a scary world for kids. We don’t let them go out alone. We have ambler alerts. We have the story in the news of a girl abducted 18 years ago and just now found. Our world is a scary place for children, and a great many other people. This is the world in which calls us to reach out in live, embrace, accept and serve the least, and we can begin with the children.

Our mission is to be that Christian community, that Church that follows Jesus and serves God. We are called to serve others. We can start by hugging the least around us, both children and adults. We can become a great Church by serving others, being child friendly, and showing the world that there is a different way.

I saw some of this in action yesterday in Camden. People from Grace Church, First Presbyterian, Trinity (Collingswood), and Haverford College met at St. Wilfrid’s Church for a clean up day inside and out. More than 20 of us helped the folks at St. Wilfrid’s take

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another step towards creating a free medical clinic for the poor and needy. I think this is what it means to be greatest in the eyes of God! Out of love and concern for others, we can share love, compassion, friendship and hugs with a world in need. When we accept and embrace the least, just like Jesus and the child, then we are well on our way to the Kingdom of God! May we become a great Church!