

THE CHILD IS STILL IN THE ROOM

19 Pentecost – B September 30, 2018

Mark 9:[35-37], 38-40

Last Sunday, in the aftermath of Hurricane Florence, we came together in worship, grateful that these Outer Banks were left relatively unscathed, but only because the storm tracked to the south, bringing damage to much of the area south of us and stirring up tornadoes to the north. The disciples' argument of who was greatest seemed bothersome at best, even when considering the effect of petty jealousy, back-biting, and pomposity in the world around us today. Jesus told his disciples: "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant to all." In the aftermath of a storm, thoughts of personal glory get quickly cast aside when the true humans we were created to be go about the more important business of caring for one another.

I re-read a portion of last week's gospel because there was a transitional example and exhortation that bridges last week's gospel and this week's reading. Jesus made a point about the worth of God's people by bringing a child from the assembled group and placing that child in their midst.

In those days, I'm sure children were valued, but not quite in the same way we cherish them today. People had more children, mortality rates were higher, and your offspring were more of a possession to help you earn an income now, rather than being cherished as an extension of oneself and a vision of the future. Yet Jesus took one of "the least of these" of his society, placed that child in the people's midst, and proclaimed: "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me." The child brings everything into perspective.

Shift now into this week's gospel, where we are continuing where we left off. The disciples have moved beyond the quarrel with each other to an *us and them* plea: "Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons *in your name*, and we tried to stop him, because he *was not following us*." (Divisiveness, suspicion, and jealousy weren't just invented in the current political climate!) John and the others expect a reaction out of Jesus—a little righteous anger, at least. Instead, Jesus tells them to let it go. If they're healing in his name, they're hardly speaking evil of him. And, if they're *not against us*, they must be *for us*. (For a different viewpoint in an entirely different context, see Matthew's gospel [Mt. 12:30].)

I had to wonder: Did having a child in their midst put things in perspective once again? You see, we moved right into this discussion with no apparent transition in the text. There's a child in the room, and Jesus has just told them that the child is not only a reflection of him, but of God! Children are pretty open-minded and welcoming, themselves. It's usually the negative things that happen in the world around them (essentially controlled by adults) that can make things go awry. So, even though Jesus used the term "little ones" instead of "children" in his warning, the point is the same. Our actions (or inactions) are the things that tend to drive people away, create divisions, and even cause them to question their faith.

As a pastor, I'm less concerned about the person who has transferred to another church than I am for someone who has drifted away. Is there something that I've said or done that has kept that person away? Or something I've failed to say or do? [Or, to borrow the language at the end of this text, did I over-salt—or did I forget and leave the salt out of the food I was preparing?]

Likewise we can apply those standards to all relationships that don't feel quite right.

Jesus' warning to his hearers about cutting off a foot or plucking out an eye is extreme, and we could say that he's using hyperbole (exaggeration) to make a point. But to dismiss his words as "over the top" is to risk dismissing his warning that what we say and what we do can cause others to stumble. What we fail to say or do can be harmful, as well. What are the things we have done? What are the things we have left undone?

In recent months and weeks, between abuse scandals in churches and allegations of abuse by those in positions of power (or those seeking positions of power), many people feel that their innocence, their sense of trust, has been eroded. When churches/clergy abuse, people often question why God "lets these things happen" or why incidents were covered up. Many explanations have been made and excuses have been given. Even when meant to be helpful, no excuse is adequate and no purpose is honorable, in the eyes of the one who has been harmed.

When a date-rape or other abusive incident occurs, the victim not only feels shame, but is often shamed by society: "Why didn't she report it? She's lying. She must have asked for it. Why ruin the man's reputation?" A friend who was raped some time ago was told by authorities to *not* report the incident because it would cost her personally and professionally. Far too many people hold back the secrets that they've tried (mostly unsuccessfully) to keep buried within.

And the words of Jesus come back to us, haunting us, reminding us of things we've done as well as things we've failed to do. Little wonder that Jesus' words sound abrupt and harsh. For those "little ones" at any age who have been mistreated or misled, the hurt simply doesn't go away. We must do better for them. We must continue to ask and demand of ourselves: *Can we do better the next time we learn of someone causing another to stumble, to feel shame, to isolate from friends, to avoid church, to suffer in silence? Will we? Amen.*

Mark 9:35-37, 38-50

³⁵[Jesus] sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, “Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.” ³⁶Then he took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms, he said to them, ³⁷“Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.”

³⁸John said to him, “Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us.” ³⁹But Jesus said, “Do not stop him; for no one who does a deed of power in my name will be able soon afterward to speak evil of me. ⁴⁰Whoever is not against us is for us. ⁴¹For truly I tell you, whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you bear the name of Christ will by no means lose the reward.

⁴²“If any of you put a stumbling block before *one of these little ones who believe in me*, it would be better for you if a great millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea. ⁴³If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life maimed than to have two hands and to go to hell, to the unquenchable fire. ⁴⁵And if your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life lame than to have two feet and to be thrown into hell. ⁴⁷And if your eye causes you to stumble, tear it out; it is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and to be thrown into hell, ⁴⁸where their worm never dies, and the fire is never quenched.

⁴⁹“For everyone will be salted with fire. ⁵⁰Salt is good; but if salt has lost its saltiness, how can you season it? Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another.”