

9.23.2018 Pentecost 18, Proper 20, Year B
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Proverbs 31:10-31
Psalm 1
James 3:13-4:3, 7-8a
Mark 9:30-37

A little over 30 years ago, a Unitarian minister named Robert Fulghum wrote a best-selling book of essays with the rather cute title, “All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten.” The book takes its title from the first essay in which Fulghum makes a list of life-lessons he (and we) should have learned early in life and that really need to be carried over into adulthood, things like:

- Share everything.
- Play fair.
- Don’t hit people.
- Put things back where you found them.
- Clean up your own mess.
- Say you’re sorry when you hurt someone.
- Flush.

When this was published in the mid-eighties, it was the era of “Bonfire of the Vanities” on Wall Street and Iran-Contra in Washington. The world seemed coarse beyond all hope, and Fulghum’s little book struck a lot of people as just the ticket to return to a kinder, gentler society. Just do those things we were all taught as young children. It sold millions of copies and sat at the top of the New York Times bestseller list for weeks.

When Jesus places a child among the disciples as the model we should follow, the ones we should welcome, I’m sure most of us probably have a pretty good idea of what he’s talking about: young, innocent, uncorrupted by the world, trusting.

Yes, we might think this, but we would be wrong.

Jesus’s use of a child is a direct contradiction of the disciples argument about who is the greatest among them. If you think about it, they *are* acting like children, but it’s this idea of greatness that Jesus is challenging. The disciples seem to think that the closer they get to be to Jesus, the more honor and privilege they will have. They *still* don’t get it.

You will recall that last week, Jesus snapped at Peter for arguing about what it meant to be a messiah. It was not to become a powerful king, a warrior, overthrowing oppressors. No, it was to be one who came to suffer and die at the hand *of* those oppressors. At the beginning of today's gospel, he reiterates this theme, and, having witnessed what happened to Peter, our text tells us that they were afraid to ask him what he meant about being killed and rising again!

I might be willing to cut them some slack if what we heard about last week and what we heard this week followed consecutively in the text. But it doesn't. Many days have passed. Peter and James and John witnessed the transfiguration on a mountaintop. Jesus cast a demon out of a boy after the remaining disciples were unable to do so, and he continues to teach them as they make their way through Galilee to Capernaum. And *that's* when this argument about who is the greatest took place. Have they heard *nothing* Jesus is trying to tell them? Perhaps continuing with the theme I was on last week, maybe they were still expecting *one* kind of Messiah and just couldn't wrap their heads around this *other* version Jesus was talking about. And they all wanted to be the trusty sidekick getting the glory once the kingdom of Israel was restored.

So Jesus takes a child and puts her in the middle of the disciples and says to them, "You want to be great? Then you need to be like *this*. You need to welcome *this* one because God welcomes *this* one." It has nothing to do with the innocence and trust of children. Children were *nobodies* in 1st century Palestine. They were like property. Completely insignificant and not worthy of attention. They were more of the outcasts with whom Jesus spent so much time.

What Jesus is saying is that you have to do what I've been doing - spending my time with those on the outside. Those who don't count for anything in the world's eyes. Like those who get separated from the parents through no fault of their own and are warehoused in detention centers. Those are the ones who count for everything in God's eyes. Stop trying to be great. Greatness doesn't lie in how accomplished you are or how cozied up to power you are.

This is a theme to which Jesus returns over and over again. He tells parables about not taking the seat at the head of the table and about a great party none of the privileged want to attend so the host invites all the outcasts from the streets. Jesus says the first will be

last and the last first. And he isn't just talking about possibilities. He is talking about himself, God's beloved, whose greatness is not measured by symbols of power and royalty but by a wooden cross and a crown of thorns.

Robert Fulghum's essay may have contained some cute and pithy steps for living in peace with our neighbors, but it's also a checklist of things that might lead us to believe that if we just do them, all will be well. It's a dangerous and slippery slope into making us believe that if we just do the right things, life will be good and heaven awaits on the other side. That's not how life works and it isn't how God's grace works. We can't earn God's love. We can't earn our salvation by behaving ourselves by following some set of rules. We will fail every single time. One of the collects during the season of Lent says that "we have no power in ourselves to help ourselves" (BCP 218). All we can do is trust in God's love. "Draw near to God and God will draw near to you," James writes in today's lesson (4:8). True greatness lies in recognizing that we have no power on our own to save ourselves.

I don't have to tell you that there is no set of rules to follow that will guarantee you the good life. There is not a person here - at least those of you who have a couple of decades under your belt - who have not experienced some kind of pain or loss or trauma or diagnosis no matter how upstanding a life you may have led. Life happens. Loss happens. The Good News is that you never have to face life alone. Jesus promised to be with us always, to the end of the age (Matthew 28:20). And we, as Christ's body on earth, are with you, too, walking with you in love and support and care. This is what Church does at its best.

Here at All Saints, we welcome the children into our midst. And we welcome those who may be on the outside looking in, those outcasts whom Jesus so loved. My prayer for this congregation is that we will always remember that our ministry is to those on the margins because it was Jesus's ministry, too. And if we do that ministry well and right, it puts us on the outside, too, not aligned with privilege and power, but with the poor and the imprisoned and the refugee. *That* is where our greatness lies.