

Do You Really Want Your Children to Know This Story?
A Sermon for Noon Eucharist, VTS Chapel
Wednesday, September 26, 2012
Text: Mark 9:30-37
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Several years ago, when my children were much smaller, I used to read to them from a children's story Bible every night. We read through many familiar and wonderful narratives—God brooding over the face of the deep, creating the world and all its creaturely inhabitants; the beloved story of Noah building an ark when not a drop of water could be felt from the sky; Daniel befriending lions meant for his demise; and of course the narrative of the birth of Jesus whose mother finds a safe place to give birth in spite of the family's temporary homelessness. Good stories with happy endings, these.

But one day, my neighbor was visiting as I was reading from Mark's gospel—stories about Jesus betrayed by his closest friends; hard sayings of Jesus about withered fig trees and Rachel weeping for her children; stories about the anxious, difficult last days of Jesus' earthly ministry leading up to his death, and this story, where Jesus talks about his impending death.

“Why on earth are you reading such things to your children,” my neighbor asked me, disbelief overflowing in her tone. “It's from the Bible,” I replied. “I'm reading them stories from the Bible.” She paused only slightly, staring at me like I

had lost my mind before she asked with incredulity, “Can’t you find some other stories in that Bible?” “They’ll hear it in church,” I said. “They need to know the story.” Again the pause, the squinting eyes, and her pointed question: “Do you really want your children to know that story?”

It’s a good question. The scriptures certainly have plenty of material that does not qualify as appropriate children’s bedtime literature, rated so because of inappropriate sexual content, more than mild language, moral ambiguity and/or violence. In response to this, many parents, pastors, and religious educators have created what is essentially a “children’s canon,” a set of stories from the scriptures with content deemed suitable for telling to children, or tales told in uncomplicated ways that remove the tension, violence, or moral difficulty from them. Thus the tale of Noah and the ark moves quickly from the hammering of wood to the animals gladly disembarking under a rainbow though looking a bit green after too many days on the open sea—a story told with nary a thought to the difficult and sad matter of the fate of all those who did not get on board with the rains came, much less the question of what kind of God would do such a thing.....

Don’t get me wrong—I think it’s a fine thing to tell gentle versions of the salvation narrative that emphasize Noah’s faithfulness and God’s rainbow promise never again to destroy, especially to the youngest of our children; as the mother of

three teens I can assure you that children will notice the gaps and ask the hard questions about the complications in the story later!

Still, I have always been a little bit suspicious of the church and wider culture's seeming captivity to domesticated images of the Baby Jesus and to sentimental and romantic images of children—clean and well dressed, playing around the pressed pleated robed knees of Jesus. I am suspicious because, unlike most artistic renderings of the scene of Jesus and the children, most of the children found in *Mark's gospel* are neither clean, well dressed, nor smiling. Most of them are children in distress—they are sick, demon possessed, and poor.

Our text for today from Mark 9 is a story about Jesus who places a child in the center of his teachings, as he tries to help his followers understand something critical about the reign of God: Jesus took a child and put him in the midst of them, and taking him in his arms, he said to them, "*Whoever welcomes one such child in my name me; and whoever welcomes me, welcomes not me but the one who sent me.*"

All well and good, this story could make it past the toughest censor of "Good Children's Stories from Scripture." But suddenly, the text takes a turn. Listen: "For Jesus was teaching his disciples, saying, 'The Son of Man [Humanity] will be delivered into the people's hands and they will kill him.'" This is a strange setting for one of the central gospel texts our church uses to assert that Jesus loved

children. Listen closely, for what Jesus in Mark's gospel goes on to say: "And when he is killed after three days he will rise. But the disciples did not understand the saying and they were afraid to ask him." Delivered into the people's hands...they will kill him... Jesus brought a child into their midst—But do you want your children to know this story?

I can't answer that for you. I can only tell you that the story Jesus tells his disciples in Mark 9, the one he goes on to embody in the coming days, is so compelling to me that I can't imagine NOT telling my children.

First, I want my children to know that God's love for them is so deep and so full that God won't stop at anything, won't let anything stand in the way of that love. Not the betrayal of friends, not the suffering and agony of death, not the pain of seeing his mother's grief—I want my children to know that God's love for them is so complete that nothing can separate them from it. I deeply desire for them to know this story of God's amazing self-offering in Jesus in whatever forms they are able to hear it across the years of their development.

Second, I want my children to understand that God's love for *other people's children* is just as deep and full and strong as is God's love for them-- and that since all children matter that dearly to God, all children need to matter to us as well. This is unapologetically a reading of the hard words of Jesus' journey to the cross as *a story of divine solidarity* with those for whom *every day's* story can only

be told with hard words. I want my children to know this story because I want them to know that the God we worship is not a God who goes to Disneyland when things get tough; our God is a stick-with-you God who can look such painful reality in the face with the empathy of one who knows first hand, and who identifies with that suffering.

This matters especially in the lives of children. Against sentimental, romanticized images of childhood as carefree and secure, living in a society in which supposedly ‘no child is left behind,’ so many children are poor (The number of children living in poverty has grown to nearly 1.3 million since 2000. In fact, the Children’s Defense Fund estimates that in this country, every 35 seconds a baby is born into poverty; in the time it takes to preach this sermon, five children will be born to mothers who received late or no prenatal care). Even among those children not suffering material poverty are so many who suffer from what theologian Pam Couture calls the “poverty of tenuous connections,” This latter kind of poverty gains traction from the increasingly common notion that children are the responsibility of their parents alone, and not of the society or community as a whole. In that logic, widely shared public support for the goods and services most directly needed by children—education, access to affordable health care—come to be seen in terms of a user-pay-as-you-go mentality; a fee for services that should be borne by parents rather than supported and shared by the whole society

who have a stake in the well-being of children. As a group, children are everywhere the ones most deeply and immediately affected by poverty. And as our students involved in VTS's prison ministry know, when a parent is incarcerated, the children go to jail too. As was true for the community addressed by Mark's gospel, in our time children remain the most vulnerable and exploited group within the society.

It is interesting to note that Jesus apparently did not share the qualms of contemporary adults about whether children could handle tough stories: In today's text from Mark 9, when Jesus pulls a child into the disciples' midst, he is bringing that child right into the middle of difficult teachings about ugly adult realities—killing and death, competition for status, envy and jealousy. Jesus the teacher engages a child to teach the disciples about who will be first and last in God's reign. Through a child, he calls on them to be a community, to be connected rather than competitive with each other.

In effect, what Jesus does is to flip on its head the usual arrangement between adults and children. We know that it takes a village to raise a child. But what Jesus shows in this text is that *it also takes a child to raise a village*—it takes a child for Jesus to make clear to his disciples that the way to walk with God is through hospitality to the vulnerable, not through jockeying for position and

power. It takes a child to stop their bickering with one another. It takes a child to proclaim the message that God is doing a new thing here and now.

Of course, the reason this action of Jesus can work as a kind of living object lesson is that in the time and world of Mark's gospel, children were at the very bottom of the social ladder, without rights, voice, power or authority. Because of their age they were vulnerable, highly dependent on others, and therefore easily exploited—not unlike our own. And so I want my children to know the story of Jesus' amazing life, his journey to Jerusalem and of his death and resurrection, because it is at its heart a story about God's radical identification with and choice for the struggling children of the world who are also God's beloved ones.

This brings me to the third reason I want my children to know the story of the story of Jesus including these harsh realities: it is, ironically, the most hope-filled story I know to tell them, and as a teacher of pastoral care, I understand that hope is an essential ingredient for human thriving. In contrast to the ambivalence toward children manifest in our time and that of Jesus, Jesus' own actions with children seem rather straightforward and unambivalent. Jesus says that when we receive a child, we receive God! Listen! "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me, welcomes not me but the one who sent me." Things are not as they seem! Suffering and death are not the last

word! The littlest are the greatest! And in this new reality of Jesus, little children are the ones who welcome God.

Jesus does love children--Those who play in the healthy fresh air all day long; and those whose days are spent shackled in a sweatshop. Jesus loves those whose bodies are respected and cared for by the adults around them—and those who are beaten, raped, or abused by adults to whom they look for love and care. Jesus loves the children who joyously spend their parent's pocket change for a treat, and those who sell plastic bags in a Filipino market place for whom such pocket change is the family's sole income. And because we know the story of Jesus' passion and resurrection, we dare to believe that abuse and poverty are not the last word because God is doing a new thing

Jesus pulled a child into the midst of his disciples as he told an abridged version of the passion narrative. I want my children to know that story because even now, today, he is drawing children right here into the midst of us, inviting us to love children like God loves them; to become a village for them and to stand in solidarity with them; and to give ourselves to the holy work of bringing about God's new reality—an end to abuse and suffering and poverty--for the children of this community, this church. This world.

Yes, I do want my children to know that story. Amen.