

The Rev. Kimberly Reinholz  
 Grace and Holy Trinity Church  
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 Mark 9:30-37

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Have you ever squabbled over who gets to sit in the front seat? Or who would get the last piece of pizza? Have you ever pulled rank over a younger sibling or felt belittled by a supervisor? Have you ever been so caught up in the politics of a social group that you lost the point of why you were friends to begin with?

Jesus catches his disciples in one of those moments. When they were more concerned about themselves than the promises of God, so Jesus asks them to consider instead not how they ought to be treated, but instead how they treat the children in their midst.

We've come a long way since the firsts century in respect to the rights of children--in Jesus' time children were of course loved, but they were not recognized as independent of their parents, they were beings with no voice, no authority, no power.

What Jesus is trying to teach the disciples is more than just respecting the rights of Children, it is elevating Children to the seat of honor. It is literally taking a person of little to no consequence outside of their family and placing them in a position of power. This is revolutionary, this is counter cultural, this is counter to everything that the disciples were arguing about on the road.

He just finished telling them again that he wasn't going to ascend to power and great glory, but that he was going to be scorned, rejected, beaten and killed, but they are still in their little entourage trying to figure out who was the greatest amongst them. The disciples continue to miss the point of what Jesus is teaching them.

I've said it before and I'll say it again, I often feel holier than thou when I read about the disciples missing the point.

Even though when I really think about it, I know that I would be missing the message if I were walking in their shoes too.

I have the benefit of the 2000 years of hindsight, and the knowledge that the prophecy of

Jesus came to fruition knowing, living and believing that the world was changed forever on Easter with the resurrection of the Messiah.

However, I believe that equally unpredictably, and awe inspiring, the incarnation of the Messiah to begin with, as a child, is an essential element of the Human experience.

It is impossible for anyone to live without being born. This is true for Jesus as well. Jesus was born, he lived on this earth and experienced all the joys and sorrows of childhood, adolescence and adulthood. He knew life and death. He knew community and family. He knew what it meant to be a child without a voice.

So by taking a child into their midst and giving over a seat even closer than his right or left hand, Jesus is elevating another of the most unlikely candidates into a position of equality in the Kingdom of God.

How we treat children, how we treat the least among us, how we treat one another is a reflection of

our understanding of who Jesus is.

This is part of the reason that in the Episcopal tradition we baptize babies. Because Jesus taught us that children are to be valued. That children are welcome in God's family and they have an important role to play in the communion of saints. We believe that at baptism any individual is fully incorporated into the body of Christ--and all of us have a voice in the kingdom of God.

How we care for our children is an important barometer of how we are doing on our spiritual journey. A few weeks ago I stood here and told you about being a fierce mama- how I advocate for my children- for Audrey and Owen, the ones at Red Door and CIRCLES, the ones in the Upper Room-- but today I want to share with you how children have influenced my spiritual journey.

Because I have not been able to reach all of them to have permission to tell their stories I am using abbreviations for their names. But there are three stories I want to share with you about how

Children in the Church who have changed how I “do church.”

First let me tell you about J. J was in kindergarten at the first church I worked at in a pastoral role. I was 26, working part time as the youth ministry coordinator for a suburban church halfway between Reading and Philadelphia. I was newly single, again, and it was Mother’s Day. I was feeling pretty down on myself because by my age my mother had already had all of her kids and two of them were potty trained and I had just moved back in with my parents. It certainly wasn’t where I expected to be.

It was the tradition in that congregation to give flowers to all the moms on Mother’s Day. A tradition which I didn’t know about until that morning. So, when J. ran up to me shoved a carnation in my face and beaming yodeled “Happy Mudders Day.” I sheepishly said “Oh thanks, but why don’t you go give it to Ms. Carol, I’m not a mother.” Without skipping a beat J. said “But you’ve got lots of kids” and listed the names of all of the youth group who sat with me regularly in church.

It was then that I remembered and knew that even if I never had children that I would always be a godparent to the children I knew in church. I thank J for teaching me that.

As I was preparing to leave that parish to go to seminary and pursue ordination I worked for a time as the Diocesan Youth Missioner and in that role I found myself working with one young man in particular--C.

C was a handful; his family situation was far from ideal. He acted out in adolescent ways, he jumped on the hood of a moving car once, he would make inappropriate jokes, he wasn’t like most of the other kids on the youth council.

He knew that his life was different too and he strived to make others aware that not everyone fit into the perfect little box, but that didn’t make anyone less than. Because of C’s advocacy we changed our registration forms from saying “parent” to “guardian” and looked more closely at what we were asking participants and their families in general. His voice being heard and recognized allowed for

a new generation of children and youth to engage with Diocesan programming without feeling alienated from the onset because they didn't have the same experience as the dominant culture.

Through C I learned that my experience of the world and the church are not universal experiences. I give thanks for C for teaching me that.

The third child I want to tell you about is S. I met S when I was in the UK through my parish there I became involved with a nonprofit organization which was housed in the building. S was a 16 year old from Sudan.

He told me over tea and biscuits one afternoon about how he had come to Brighton. He told me about the civil war about how all the men in his family had been killed. How all the women had been tortured, and how he walked from one village to the next until he finally found a family member who helped him leave Sudan.

He told me about the truck which he hid in and the smuggler who he still owed money to and the fear

that he felt at every knock on the door of the flat he shared with 5 other teenage boys who were also from Sudan.

He shared his story knowing that I was an American student studying in the UK and not expecting me to do anything for him, but knowing that if he didn't share his story it would go untold.

Through S I learned what an honor it is to hold someone's story, to recognize their truth, and participate in Holy Listening. I thank S for that.

I share these stories with you today not to highlight how awesome I am, rather to show you how much I have to learn and how to paraphrase, Whitney Houston, that our vocation is to teach our children well and let them lead the way.

I imagine that each of you can think of at least one child or more who has impacted the way you live your life, in a big or small way.

A niece or nephew, a student or godchild, a neighbor or fellow parishioner across the generations we learn from one another. I'd like

for you to take a moment now to think of that child who has shown you the promised Kingdom. Please say their name aloud during the prayers of the people today and thank God for all that they have done for you.

But also consider for the rest of the week and month and year and honestly for the rest of your life--remember those children who you will never know.

Children struggling in various ways and living voiceless existences--children alone through no fault of their own, children who are victims or survivors of abuse, children who live in poverty, children who are bullied, children who are hungry, homeless or uncertain where they will eat or sleep next, children who have survived natural disasters and live with the nightmare of violence, children suffering in ways known to God alone.

Remember these children. Before we worry about where we fall in the pecking order of saints let us worry about all of them because Christianity not about us, but about them. Amen