

September 19th, 2021

Year B; 17th Pentecost

James 3: 13-4:3, 7-8a

Psalm 54

Mark 9: 30-37

Mark 9:30-37

Jesus and his disciples passed through Galilee. He did not want anyone to know it; for he was teaching his disciples, saying to them, "The Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him, and three days after being killed, he will rise again." But they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him.

Then they came to Capernaum; and when he was in the house he asked them, "What were you arguing about on the way?" But they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another who was the greatest. He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all." Then he took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms, he said to them, "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me."

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

As we continue in our journey through the gospel of Mark, we are reminded over and over again how quickly the action moves in this gospel.

Today Jesus spends time alone with his closet friends, telling them for the second of three times, that he will be betrayed, arrested, suffer, die, and rise again.

Jesus is telling them the truth about his path, and about their path and about ours, if we choose to take our Christian faith seriously. This is not a path of

ease, prosperity, or getting what we want.

And his disciples and possibly we, do not understand and are silent, afraid to ask Jesus questions.

Then, quickly, the scene changes from a talk on the road, to gathering in a house. And Jesus asks his friends what they were arguing about while they had been on the road.

Just after he tells them his path will be difficult, they turn away and discuss who is the greatest; they sound like us, competing for status, who is the most important in the room?

Again, when Jesus engages them, they are silent, now not afraid of his words, but ashamed, caught by the teacher, focusing on the values of the world, not of Jesus.

Jesus does not reprimand his friends, instead, he finds a place to sit, lifts a child up and into his lap, and begins speaking.

Now who is this child? How old is he or she? Does this child live in the house? The Bible leaves so many of my questions unanswered! And instead, the Bible leaves space for me to wonder and ponder.

A house full of visiting men tells me the child is likely a boy; a girl would not be allowed to wander among such guests. The boy must be quite young, a toddler, or maybe up to four or five years but no more, to be corralled by a stranger, yes the Messiah, but still, older boys prefer to not be tethered or

drawn into adult conversations.

So, a toddler, toddling by, and Jesus scoops up that little fellow, and holds him.

I ponder little children.....At the wedding I did last Saturday, the flower girl was only 21 months old, quite young to take on this role. Additionally, her grandmother told me she had been a preemie, born early, and thus an extra young almost 2 year old.

At the rehearsal, she was decidedly not interested in her role. Her mother had torn up toilet paper for her to practice throwing out of her flower basket. She refused.

After the rehearsal though, she found her joy. Out in the Trinity parking lot, she discovered the gravel. She hunkered over in that wonderfully flexible way of toddlers and began inspecting and collecting rocks. Her little fists grew full of choice rocks. Her mother and father had to cajole her into the car to head to the rehearsal dinner, rocks still firmly gripped in her chubby fists.

I picture the toddling boy that Jesus scoops up in the same mode as the flower girl. Clutching something in one hand, maybe both. A rock a twig; with our grandson at this age it was always a Matchbox car, though unlikely available in Capernaum.

So Jesus sits with this little fellow in his lap, who is more interested in the

rocks in his hands then the Son of God, and Jesus says of this child, after his disciples have been arguing about who is the greatest:

“Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.”

Likely the disciples, and anyone else in the house listening would have stared at Jesus. No matter how cute this toddler might have been, it was still just a child! What does Jesus mean, if you welcome this child, you welcome HIM??

Children 2000 years ago were not the center of attention, as they often are today at a gathering. Children were among the least valued in society, vulnerable, helpless, and close to being considered possessions of their fathers. They had no rights.

But Jesus shocks folks again, first bringing this child into the center of the room, paying attention to him, and then saying anyone who welcomes, values, attends to this child, welcomes me, the Messiah.

Again, and yet again, Jesus tells us, plainly, that when we welcome and care for the least, we will meet him.

So today we add to our list:

Feed the hungry

Water for the thirsty

Clothe the shivering

Care for the sick

Visit the prisoner

Welcome the stranger

Welcome the child

Welcome the least, the vulnerable, the frightened, the helpless.

As you likely know, the United States is welcoming thousands of refugees from Afghanistan, currently 37,000, with the number expected to rise.

Strangers, children, vulnerable, frightened, powerless.

What can we do? How can we as Christians be a small part of that welcome?

I'm sure you have ideas, but here are just two from me. First, Episcopal Migration Ministries is working to help receive and settle Afghan refugees. They are in much need of financial donations to help secure housing for folks. Second, our own Rappahannock Art League in Kilmarnock is collecting art supplies and coloring books for Afghan children coming to Fort Lee in Petersburg. If you are interested in helping in either of these ways, I'll have a handout with details after worship.

Finally, of course, we need to pray and pray again, for these strangers, these children, coming here so suddenly, with so little, and to hear Jesus telling his disciples and us:

“Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.”

Let us pray:

All-loving God, Your hands have fashioned every lovely corner of this treasured planet, and the beautiful land of Afghanistan is as precious as every other place Your children call 'home'.

We grieve today with those who grieve over Afghanistan, the people who call it home indeed, the people exiled or suddenly having to leave, men, women, and children.

We pray for peace, dignity, safety, and hope for the men, women and children of Afghanistan; for courage, vision and generosity within the international community responding to such need.

In the name of Jesus Christ, the peace-giver, we pray, AMEN.

(Prayer adapted from a prayer written by the Rev Dr Marjory MacLean, The Church of Scotland)