

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ!

Jesus has been to the villages of Caesarea Philippi, he's asked his disciples who people say that he is, and more importantly he's asked them who they say he is. "You are the Messiah," Peter answered for the group. Shortly after Peter is rebuked by Jesus when Peter has set his "mind not on divine things but human things." Jesus has shared with his disciples and with the crowd "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me."

Not too long after this Jesus takes Peter, James and John to a high mountain where he is transfigured before them, what a glorious sight, Jesus shining in dazzling light on a mountain. Then the voice from the clouds "This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him." Jesus orders them to tell no one about what they had seen until the resurrection.

Coming down Jesus casts a demon out of a man's son, they then go on from there passing through Galilee. Jesus shares again that he will be betrayed, killed and after three days rise again. This is the second time he has shared this with them, but they don't understand and they are afraid to ask him.

Arriving at the house in Capernaum, Jesus asks them what they were arguing about on the way. This ninth chapter of Mark which began on the mountaintop comes crashing down to earth! They've been arguing about who among them was the greatest. Jesus sits down with them and tells them plainly and bluntly: "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all." They had argued about who was greatest of all and Jesus called them to be last of all. Now keep in mind that Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem, all attempts to seize him, arrest him, bind him have failed because there is a time appointed by the Father, and it's not quite yet. I think in the same manner, even though the disciples have heard Jesus say and say again some teachings, it is not yet their time, they hear, intellectually they know what Jesus has said, but their hearts are full of human things, not divine things, they have not yet received the gift of the Holy Spirit. When that happens they will recall what they have been taught, and it will be heart knowledge as well as head knowledge.

Now at this point I can imagine their eyes glazing over, they've heard these opposites before. Save life lose life, first last, great servant. He's always talking like this, and Jesus sees they didn't get it - yet. So he takes a little child and puts the child in the midst of them.

We don't know whose child it was, but Jesus saw the child. This child is important to Jesus. "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me." Perhaps Peter, James and John remember the voice from the cloud. They knew who sent Jesus. Heavenly images, and Jesus holding a child on his lap.

Jesus wants them and us to see the child, and welcome the child. The child is not innocent, pure, cute, perfect, not religious at this time in his or her life. Instead it's welcome the child who is at the bottom of the social heap. In Mark children are often sick or disabled e.g., Jairus' daughter has died after illness, the Syrophenician woman's daughter possessed by an unclean spirit; and coming down the mountain a man brings his son to Jesus. Jesus commands the spirit to leave the boy, who is lifted to new life. Children in our gospel are not holy or innocent, but victims, often of disease or possession. And Jesus brings the child to the center. Not a symbol, a person, a little person easily overlooked, often unseen and unheard.

But we think we're different. We value children in church and in society. Church growth folks target children. What do you look for in a church?" Right up there along with adequate parking is childcare space which must be cheerful and well-supervised. But if we listen to voices in the public arena there is very little passion for the care and wellbeing of children once they are born. Sometimes it seems that the worst thing that can happen to children is birth. Before birth they are cherished, but after birth they sometimes seem to be on their own. Jesus wants us to see the children, to bring them from the margins and hold them on our laps.

Do you see this child? Jesus asks. "Whoever welcomes this child welcomes me and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me." This sounds wonderful but soon when people bring children to Jesus for a blessing, the disciples speak sternly to them. Perhaps their scolding sounds a bit like us, or me for that matter, when children make too much noise during worship. Kids fidget. How many noisy children can people tolerate while they're praying, singing or listening to the sermon? So what's our welcome like for our children?

Was Jesus an idealist when he set a little child in the midst of the disciples that day in Capernaum? No, not an idealist. But Jesus wants to open the kingdom of God to those not everyone wants to see; to extend hospitality to those we often hear but don't really see. Keep in mind that Jesus turns the world upside down! He heals when he's not supposed to, he touches people he shouldn't touch and talks about suffering and death after the glory on the mountain.

Brothers and sisters, our thoughts of greatness mean nothing if we don't see the little ones in our midst. In Capernaum Jesus held a little child in his arms and brought the words of heaven down to earth. I can imagine Jesus whispering in the child's ear: "You are God's Beloved Child." And this is our legacy for our children.

I see Jesus looking over the child's shoulder and he's looking at us. "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me." Caring for children even if we have none of our own, not only our children and grandchildren but children of migrants, immigrants and refugees sleeping in a field, or drowned on a shore, to see the child who nightly moves to shelter. We have to see our children. All of them! AMEN