

## **HOW ARE THE CHILDREN?**

*James 3:13-18 Mark 9:33-37*

On this the Lord's Day we have taken a few moments to launch our fall Sunday School program, to commission our children and youth as "Disciples in Training", and to call and bless each of them by name: Ian, Kaylie, Dakota, Taylor, Hayden, Abel, Max, Ricky, Sarah, Aris, Cami, Haley, Maddie, Jonathan, Katie, Vickiy. From the youngest to the oldest these are the names of our children and youth. To know their names is one way that we honor them, cherish them, value them. This was not the case in the ancient culture of Jesus' time. Children were not honored. They were not cherished. They were not valued. They were insignificant – nameless nobodies – the least important among the marginalized, the destitute, the outcasts of society – the lowest on the priority list. Thomas Aquinas taught that in Mediterranean cultures a husband was obliged to save from a raging fire – first his father, then his mother, next his wife, and last of all his child.

In our contemporary culture we would reverse that order. So when we read about Jesus picking up a small child, tenderly embracing that child, and exhorting his followers that to welcome this child was to welcome him, we think to ourselves, "Now isn't that sweet." Yes, it is a sweet, sentimental scene but that's not what's going on here. Once again Jesus has said something quite perplexing and has done something quite radical.

Remember that the disciples have been arguing with one another about who is the greatest. They were convinced that as followers of Jesus bigger and better things were in store for them. Expecting that Jesus would be a military hero and restore Jerusalem to its glory days, they argued among themselves about who would be his chief of staff, who would get the top cabinet post in Jesus' administration. They had success, power, rank, titles, wealth, recognition, privilege, and prestige on their minds. So Jesus takes them aside, sits them down, and turns their idea of greatness and glory upside down by talking instead about being servants, about being last. He said to them, "Whoever wants to first must be last of all and servant of all."

As he so often does, Jesus uses more than words to teach his lesson. This time his illustration or we might say his “visual aid” is a little child who happens to be nearby. Jesus tells his disciples, “You see this child... who needs to be fed, clothed, washed, taught, and loved... the kingdom of God belongs to this child. You want to know who’s the greatest, look at this child – thirty-six inches tall, needing everything and giving nothing. Welcome this child and all like this child – those without status, influence or income; those who struggle to make it through a day; those who are not important; those who don’t count; those who are vulnerable and powerless; those who can never pay you back: the old, the disabled, the sick, the unclean, the homeless, the widow, the prisoner, the immigrant. If you want to be great welcome this child and all like this child, those who lack any accomplishment, greatness, or status. If you want to be great, serve this child and all like this child. Welcome them and you welcome me. Serve them and you serve me.”

What this says to me is that one way to measure the health, even the greatness of our society is to look at the state of our children. How much do we really value our children? I have no doubt that in our own families, children are loved, valued and cherished but what about children in general. Consider the recent data from the Children’s Defense Fund.

- Every 33 seconds a child is born into poverty. That’s 13.3 million children, a number that exceeds the population of Illinois.
- Every 11 seconds of a school day a child drops out of school.
- Every 35 seconds a child is abused or neglected.
- Every 39 seconds a child is born without health coverage and the number of children lacking health coverage is nearing the 10 million mark. A number that exceeds the population of Switzerland.
- Every 3 hours a child is killed by gunfire.

It’s disheartening to consider these disturbing facts. Even more so when we begin to put faces to the numbers – faces of innocent, vulnerable children. Jesus would say that those who serve these children serve him, that those who welcome these children welcome him.

There is a very fabled and accomplished ethnic group in Africa, called the Masai. No group was considered to have warriors more fearsome or more intelligent than the mighty Masai. It is surprising to learn that the traditional greeting that was passed between Masai warriors was, *Kasserian Ingera*” – “*And how are the children?*”

It is still a traditional greeting in the Masai culture because they place a high value on their children's well-being. Even Masai with no children of their own always give the traditional answer, "*All the children are well.*" Meaning, of course, that peace and safety prevail, that the priorities of protecting the young, the powerless, are in place, that the Masai society has not forgotten its reason for being, its proper functions and responsibilities. "All the children are well" means that life is good.

I wonder how it might affect our own consciousness concerning the welfare of the children in our nation if we took to greeting each other with this daily question: "And how are the children?" If we heard that question and passed it along to each other a dozen times a day, I wonder if it would begin to make a difference in the reality of how children are thought of and cared for and valued in our society. What if every pastor began every worship service, if teachers began every class, if city council members began every meeting, if business leaders and corporate executives began every work day, with the question "*And how are the children? Are they well?*" surely it would change our culture's priorities and help create a healthier society.

If at the opening bell of Wall Street every morning the question was asked "How are the children?", we could be assured that the number of stocks and bonds sold, exchanged and bought that day would first be guided by how it would benefit the well-being of our nation's children. If every session of congress began with the question, "How are the children?" we could be assured that it would not be powerful lobbyists that would determine legislation but the well-being of our nation's children. And whether we are talking about education funding, health care reform, or addressing global climate change, to ask the question "How are the children?" would mean that the guiding principal for all major decisions in our nation would be the well-being of children. And if the children are well then families are well, if children are well then cities are well, if children our well then our nation is well. And in Jesus' words when the children have been served and welcomed, then it is Jesus who has been served and welcomed.

Friends, Jesus stands in our midst today and asks of us, "And how are the children?" As we bless the children here at Knox and by our example teach them to serve in the name of Jesus, may we ever be about assuring that "All our children are well." With this in heart and mind, please join your hearts with me in prayer.

Gracious God, we are your people and it is our joy and privilege to pray for the well-being of all children. We pray for sick and injured children without health care, and parents who bear the heartache of a sick child and the inability to afford care. God, grant them strength and courage and the hope of a day when all have the means and access to affordable health coverage.

We pray for children and youth who are bearing the brunt of poverty, with hungry tummies and heavy hearts. We pray for parents who work hard at jobs that still leave them below the poverty line, unable to provide their families' basic needs. God, grant them strength and courage and the hope of a day when a living wage is the norm and the basic needs of all are met.

We pray for children and youth who cower under beds out of fear of gunfire out their windows or fear of beatings inside their homes. God, grant them the strength and courage and the hope of a day when all homes and neighborhoods are safe.

We pray for children and youth who do not know their inherent, God-given worth. Place in their lives parents and teachers, mentors and friends that affirm their value and declare that they are beloved children of God.

Gracious God, grant us the eyes and hearts to see all people - especially the most vulnerable in our society – the poor, the hungry, the sick, the outcast – as your children. Give us hearts to welcome them and the means to serve them and thus help create a society where all your children all well.

In the name of Christ our Lord who came as a child, we pray. Amen.