

SECOND CHILDHOOD

St Andrew's UC, Sudbury; September 20, 2009

Mark 9:30-37

Then Jesus took a little child and put it among them...

This morning, we saw the children gathered in *our* midst—
the little ones of this congregation—
and we took delight in them.

They are, every one of them, beloved, celebrated, cherished...
and, not least, privileged.

They wake up in nice warm beds
and are offered a hearty breakfast every morning.

When they are the appropriate age,
they go off to school to learn and develop and grow.

They have myriad options open to them for recreation and entertainment.

They are empowered and,

I can tell you from personal experience with my own grandchildren,
they have a powerful lot of influence over our lives!

Our contemporary culture values the child deeply as an individual,
a person with the same rights as all other members of society.

When Jesus sets a child in the midst of the gathering,
it happens in a somewhat different context.

While this little one in Jesus' arms may be deeply valued
by his family and community,
he is not in any way indulged.

In the first place, there is no money for that.

In the second place, this child is considered an adult in the making—
who will develop his economic potential in the community—
and his parents are hoping that some day
he will be able to look after them in their old age.

Although he may be loved, he does not hold very high status as a child;
he will be strictly reared to obey the *paterfamilias*
and all his childish immaturity and “weakness of mind”
will be disciplined out of him.

It's important, we are reminded by commentary on this passage,
not to be too sentimental in our reading of this story.

Childhood in the ancient world was “a perilous time.”

Children were more vulnerable than most of society:
vulnerable to war, disease, the oppression of social hierarchy,
and gender preference...
(I've wondered whether Jesus took a girl-child to make his point).

So when Jesus holds this little one in his arms
as an example of who's important and valuable,
he's clearly saying that doing things God's way
means rethinking our whole approach to life.
Jesus is pointing to a radically new ordering of society.

If we back up a little to what precedes this moment
of learning from the child on Jesus' lap,
we can better understand why Jesus has reached for this little one.
It's kind of an embarrassing event for the disciples, actually.
Humbling.

Because they've been arguing about who's going to be
The Greatest In God's Kingdom.
And Jesus has caught them out.

Somehow, as they were trudging along the road toward Capernaum,
Jesus overheard something in their conversation
or maybe simply picked up on the tension.

At any rate, when they're in the foyer at Peter's house,
leaning over to untie their sandal straps,
he says to them, "So. What were you guys arguing about back there?"

Well, okay. So maybe this doesn't look too good on them.
This vying for power and status.

They've been around Jesus long enough to know that's not how *he* functions
and now they're avoiding eye contact
because no one wants to answer his question.

But maybe their internal defenses go up.

Maybe they're thinking,

"Okay, we shouldn't be fighting about this.
but obviously *someone's* going to be in charge in the kingdom.

It's a kingdom, after all, and that means a king.
A monarch. Someone in authority."

This idea of the kingdom of God has been around for a long time,
and the disciples are good with the idea
that God's going to put Jesus in charge.

But they want to know who's going to sit at the Round Table with Jesus.
In any and every way they've ever seen it,
 the presence of a ruler always means some kind of hierarchy—
all the common folk who need to be ruled and then the ruler's henchmen:
 maybe senators or councilors or grand dukes or governors.
And then, of course, at the top of the heap: the Ruler.
So—who's going to be in that in-between stratum?
If Jesus is God's appointed and anointed,
 who will comprise the Grand Council?
Are Jesus' closest disciples and followers going to be the chosen ones,
 the special ones empowered to speak and act
 on behalf of the king?
This is very clearly a question about power and status and authority.
And Jesus says,
 "You've got it wrong.
 You have your heads (and maybe your hearts) in the wrong place.
God's kingdom is not at all about the kind of power you are imagining.
Here—" and he sets a little child in their midst.

Perhaps this sounds and feels like a reprimand to the disciples.
After all, they just got caught red-handed
 being self-seeking and power-hungry.
And maybe they're thinking Jesus is being just a tad ridiculous—
 What?! This is the essence of the kingdom,
 this scruffy, snotty-nosed little kid?
What's to emulate in this undeveloped social dependant
 who can't even look after himself?
How can anyone run an effective government
 if they open up all the doors to the weak and the needy,
the have-nots and the can-nots who lean on the rest of society
 for even their most basic needs?

Jesus just shrugs in the face of those arguments
 and gives that little one on his lap another squeeze.
"Sorry, friends," he says, "but this is how it is:
 whoever wants to be in charge has to be vulnerable.
 Like a servant. Or a child."

You know,
 we work pretty hard to get grown-up and not be childish anymore.

And we work pretty hard to get our kids to grow up too.
All this growing up can't be a bad thing, can it?
Here's something Ann Weems says, in her poetic way,
about birth and development:

*I celebrate birth: the wonder—the miracle—
of that tiny life already asserting its selfhood.¹*

Ann Weems is forever celebrating!
And we celebrate along with her
the wonder of a tiny life embarked on the journey of becoming.
Asserting our selfhood is natural.
It's simply who we are.
We can't avoid it.
According to Marcus Borg,
that's what the Genesis story about Adam and Eve describes:
the human being becoming self-aware,
taking the power of choice and running with it.
Borg says the birth of self-consciousness happens early in life.
Before we even start talking,
we realize that we and the world around us
are *not* one and the same thing.
We become aware that this is me
and all that other stuff out there is not me.
Hail the emergence of the separated self!

But there's something not so nice about this development of self-awareness.
Borg refers to the birth of the separated self as The Fall.
That's right, that infamous slide into not-so-good behaviour
in the Garden of Eden. The Fall.
Granted, The Fall is unavoidable and it's necessary.
It happens to everyone.
We need it to happen if we're going to grow up
and develop into mature human beings.
And yet, says Borg, it's a "fall—into a world of self-consciousness
and self-centredness, estrangement and exile."²
That self-conscious being, disguised as a cute little toddler,
starts merrily off on the path of self-concern.
(What? You don't believe me? *I'm the king of the castle...*)

¹ From "Balloons Belong in Church" in *Reaching for Rainbows*, 21.

² *The Heart of Christianity*, 114.

And by the time we get to be as old as the disciples,
we are every bit as busy looking out for No. 1 as they are.

So is this a reprimand from Jesus?

Maybe a little bit.

But, I think, much more than a reprimand.

Jesus knows that his disciples are more than
the sum total of their self-concern.

He knows that deep inside each of us,
there is a remembering of how things used to be—
a yearning for a lost “mystery and magic,”
a wistful dreaming of how things might have been.

And so he extends to the disciples
and, I believe, to us,
an invitation to second childhood.

It is an invitation to back up a little,
away from disillusionment back into hope
from cynicism into trust
from rigidity into spontaneity
from places of power into places of vulnerability...

Here is American poet Billy Collins, “On Turning Ten”:

**The whole idea of it makes me feel
like I’m coming down with something,
something worse than any stomach ache
or the headaches I get from reading in bad light—
a kind of measles of the spirit,
a mumps of the psyche,
a disfiguring chickenpox of the soul.**

**You tell me it is too early to be looking back,
but that is because you have forgotten
the perfect simplicity of being one
and the beautiful complexity introduced by two.
But I can lie on my bed and remember every digit.
At four I was an Arabian wozard.
I could make myself invisible
by drinking a glass of milk a certain way.
At seven I was a soldier, at nine a prince.**

**But now I am mostly at the window
watching the late afternoon light.
Back then it never fell so solemnly
against the sides of my tree house,
and my bicycle never leaned against the garage
as it does today,
all the dark blue speed drained out of it.**

**This is the beginning of sadness, I say to myself,
as I walk through the universe in my sneakers.
It is time to say goodbye to my imaginary friends,
time to turn the first big number.**

**It seems only yesterday I used to believe
there was nothing under my skin but light.
If you cut me I would shine.
But now when I fall upon the sidewalks of life,
I skin my knees. I bleed.³**

On Thursday morning, as I sat around the table
with the Bible Study group in the Bischoff Lounge,
I invited them to reminisce for a few moments
about their own childhood.

After a bit, the stories started to surface—
memories of experiences when we felt honoured as a child—
(being asked to play the piano at school for the other students to march in;
having some adult who made you feel special and wanted;
having the important job of escorting a visiting child to the front of the
church;
being given the critical task of picking pins up off the department store floor
so that Grandma could shop without being distracted...)

There were other memories too.
More poignant ones—
(taking the blame for something in order to protect the real culprit;
getting teased on the way to school;
holding some private grief because there was no place to talk about it...)

³ As quoted by Borg in *The Heart of Christianity*, 115-6.

To be a child is
to live the enigma of wisdom and huge unanswered questions;
to be vulnerable and yet so capable of true leadership;
to be subject to the whims of adults and, at the same time,
own an amazing capacity for self-definition.

We can learn so much from children.
There is something beautifully humble in the way a child encounters life:
the eagerness to learn and ask questions;
the openness to try something new
(confronting newness is a daily reality for a toddler!);
the spontaneity that expresses itself in play and pretending;
the capacity to accept other children as equals;
the vulnerability to laugh and throw tantrums
and dance and sing, as the spirit moves.

I wonder how well we've truly convinced ourselves
(those of us who are past our teens)
that we're all grown up and we like it that way.
Billy Collins, poet for his generation, aches for his loss.
Marcus Borg maintains
that the inevitable result of our growing up
is that we live our lives "east of Eden."
Outside the Garden.
In a world of estrangement and self-preoccupation.
Jesus says that we've lost something so significant that,
without a wholesale change
we cannot experience "the kingdom."
Being first in God's world means being last—
vulnerable, a servant, a child.
And then he shows us how God treats those who are last.
He takes a child in his arms
and cuddles her.

How, then?
How do we get there?
How do we find our way to that freedom,
that infectious spontaneity, that clear authenticity,
that simple gladness of heart?
Jesus says it begins with knowing the truth:

that our human understandings of power are faulty.
It is a huge step to *let go*
of our quest for status and power and self-assertion.
My goodness, think of the energy we would save
if we didn't worry so much about looking out for No. 1!

And then Jesus says, "Look at this little one."
The suggested place of learning is around that children's table.
Or in that gaggle of folks in front of the Salvation Army across the street.
Or perhaps at the Special Olympics, or in a PFLAG group,
or in a Native circle, or in the company of our Out of the Cold guests.
Any place where those who are considered least
hover around the fringes of "acceptable society."
Any place where the most vulnerable of God's children are found.

"Welcome such as these," Jesus says,
"and don't set yourself apart or above;
be like one of these little ones yourself.
When you do this, the kingdom will start happening for you."
Jesus is talking about change.
A change we cannot really make ourselves.
If we could, we wouldn't be so uptight and worried
about who's going to be the greatest
and whether we are cool enough or hot enough
or good enough or smart enough.

Responding to the invitation to second childhood
(this version of it, anyway!)
means being born all over again
and starting a whole new journey of growing up.
That born-again experience is the work of God's Spirit.
As Borg points out, we can't do it ourselves.
But we *can* midwife the process—
we can help the rebirth to happen
by being intentional and prepared,
and we can nourish the new life in us with awareness and practice.

Now I always think that church is a good place for practicing.
Here, in this place of safety and security,
where we covenant together as followers of Jesus,

we can experiment with our new ways of growing up in the Spirit.
Because here we are all beloved and accepted, right?
This is the place to let ourselves get excited about life
and about new life in Christ.
Don't let's listen to those voices of culture and society
that tell us it's inappropriate for adults to laugh out loud in church,
or to let our tears flow,
or to kick up our heels and do a little jig.
At our next celebration of baptism,
let's not only welcome the newly baptized with open arms
but let's also enter into the holiness of the moment
by letting it be God's invitation to *us all* in Christ
and God's word of love and acceptance to you, to me.
And when it comes time for the feast of friends
that gather around this communion table,
let us come eagerly and greedily like children,
"Come on, everybody, it's dinnertime! Let's go, I'm starving!"
And when the church's "doorbell" rings,
when a visitor shows up at those lovely doors,
let's race to the foyer to be the first to see who it is—
like a child—and then welcome them in.

Who will be the greatest, Lord?
There is no greatest, Jesus responds.

And he sets a child in our midst.