

Betsey Moe
Sermon 8.3.08
“Kids at the Table”
Mark 9:30-37

30They went on from there and passed through Galilee. He did not want anyone to know it; 31for 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.” 32But they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him. 33Then they came to Capernaum; and when he was in the house he asked them, “What were you arguing about on the way?” 34But they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another who was the greatest. 35He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, “Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.” 36Then he took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms, he said to them, 37“Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.”

When I was a child, I remember going to Christmas dinner at my grandparents’ home. The main table would be beautiful – candles, the whole spread of oyster soup and hot chili, fresh bread steaming in a basket. It was a gleaming feast in the eyes of this child. Just as I scooted one of the big chairs out from the table (my grandparents’ dining chairs resembled thrones), I would hear, “Oh, nope, honey, you’re still at the kids’ table.” And then I’d look, and in the area in front of the coat closet was a card table set with mismatched plastic plates and cups. Because I was one of the two older cousins, I got one of two metal folding chairs. The younger kids were sitting, one on the folding kitchen step stool and the other on the ottoman with a phone book on top. And to top it all off, one of them had already spilled their milk.

The kids’ table. It is a standard fixture at homes all across America on the big holidays. Because come on, this is the only time the adults all get together, and they deserve a meal in relative peace. And since there’s not enough room at the big table, the adults get first priority; they all had to sit at a kids’ table when they were little. Dues have been paid!

There ARE practical matters to consider when having a big family meal, and sometimes the kids do enjoy being together, but I wonder if many kids’ tables are set up because kids just demand a lot of our patience. They chew with open mouths, they reach their dripping hands across serving plates, they spill, they giggle during grace, they talk about poop instead of politics. If I were to welcome a child to sit next to me at the adult table at a formal family meal, I would have to set aside my expectations for peace and perfection. I would have to shove my agenda under the table, because if I didn’t, I guarantee it would have cranberry sauce slopped on it before the night was through.

Welcoming children is a challenge.

In fact, a recent survey showed that 100% of adults find it difficult to give their full attention and energy to a child for an extended period of time. Now, I should disclose that only two people participated in this survey: my husband and I, and it was while we were sitting on our patio drinking a glass of wine after putting the kids to bed.

Welcoming children is a challenge, and Jesus knew this when he brought a child before the disciples, held that child in his arms while he was teaching, and said, “Whoever welcomes a child in my name, welcomes me.

The issue at hand was greatness. Right after Jesus told the disciples (for the second time) that the Son of Man would be betrayed and killed and then rise, the disciples had an argument among themselves about which of them was the greatest. Notice that Jesus did not chastise them for being completely inappropriate or off-base; he simply reframed greatness, saying, “Whoever wants to *be* first must be last of all and servant of all.” He wanted to draw their attention back to the pattern his own life would take: suffering, death, resurrection. Servanthood, and then glory. What they would understand after he died was that in Christ’s servanthood, his self-denying, other-focused way of life *was* his glory. But the disciples, as they are in most of Mark, were thick-headed. Thick-headedness this bad would require a serious illustration.

And so he brings out a child.

A child – who in Ancient Near Eastern culture had very little value for the present time. A child – whose usefulness only became apparent when he could work for a living and own property or, for a girl child, have babies. For Jesus to take a child into his arms in the middle of an adult discussion and to suggest that children had present value as children was a radical thing. Welcoming a child would mean not waiting for that child to become useful or productive in society, but giving them attention now. It would mean more than providing for their basic needs. It would mean, like it does today, denying oneself – denying the “adult agenda” to learn from the imperfections and inquisitiveness of children.

Some commentators have called this scene an “embodied parable.” They suggest that Jesus didn’t mean that we are literally to welcome children. He just meant that being a disciple, being a servant was *like* welcoming a child. To set aside your own needs for the sake of others is kind of like setting aside your own needs when you take care of a child. And there is truth to this metaphorical understanding. But I wonder if Jesus were being more literal than that. I wonder if there really is something that happens to us when we give our full attention to a child, when we get down on their level, when we play on their terms and not our own, that changes us into the kind of servants that Jesus calls us to be.

Last year I attended a parenting workshop led by a child psychologist in town. One practical suggestion she offered to us parents was to set aside a given amount of time every day – it could be as little as 10-30 minutes – to play with our child. The one rule during that set number of minutes was that we play on our child’s terms. If my child wanted to play spacemen and make me the alien, I said, “Beep, beep, me – alien!” If my

child wanted to play house and make me the scrambled eggs, I would get down on the floor and act scrambled. I sat there during this class, and thought, *this is such a great idea. I love my kids. I just need to put my mind to this, set aside that time each day and do it.* But in practice, I would get down on the floor to play, and my attention span was good for only about three minutes. (And we bemoan the short attention span of children!) I had a hard time not controlling what we were doing. My particular problem was falling into teacher mode. “You want me to be a scrambled egg? O.K., but first -- How do you spell egg?” And then the phone would ring, and of course, I’d answer it, and twenty minutes later, I would be folding laundry and my son would be watching a movie. I thought I would be able to “welcome” my own child, to give my undivided attention, without difficulty. I mean, I had been a superb babysitter when I myself was just on the other side of childhood. But somehow, in the rush and demands of adulthood, I had lost the skill. Welcoming a child takes energy, it takes focus, and even more than that, it takes commitment and practice.

In the light of today’s scripture, I would venture to say that welcoming a child is nothing short of a spiritual discipline. It is as important as prayer, regular Bible reading, Christian fellowship, and, I daresay, tithing. The practice or discipline of welcoming a child teaches us how to be the servants that Jesus was and Jesus wants us to be: self-denying, other-focused, and gracious. And like any discipline, it shapes the way we think about God and becomes a means of grace. When we give our full attention to a child, we begin to understand what it means for the creator of the universe to be mindful of the humans he created. When we get down on the level of a child, when we play on a child’s terms and not our own, we begin to understand what a sacrifice it was for God to come to earth, to put on the flesh of Jesus Christ. In welcoming a child to sit next to us at the adult table, we remember that only by God’s grace are *we* invited to sit next to Jesus at his feast table. The mystery of the gospel seeps into our souls when we spend the time and energy it takes to welcome children.

I may have had to sit at a kids’ table when I went to my grandparents’ house for Christmas dinner, but that scene does not tell the whole story. I am who I am – confident, assured of God’s love for me – because of the love I experienced in that home. My grandparents were excellent at making me feel fully embraced and welcome. When I was in elementary school, I called my grandma every day after school to talk about my day – and I did this because she was so good at showing genuine interest. In Junior High, I used to walk to their house after school dances (they lived across the street from the middle school) and bring my friends with me. We would sit and laugh and visit until my mom came to pick me up. When I went to college, my grandma wrote letters to me – and they were some of the only real letters I received. When I grew into an adult, she called me once a week, and when I’d answer, she would say, “Is this my little sweet darling?” as if I were 7 or 8. During that phone call, I could forget about all my responsibilities and just be a beloved child again. Since she has died, I think that phrase, “Is this my little sweet darling?” is the thing I miss the most in my week. She welcomed me; she took delight in me. And in doing so, I think she understood something of the mystery the gospel, and so did I.

There are many ways to welcome a child, to make room at the adult table of life. You may have children or grandchildren of your own, or nieces and nephews to whom you can intentionally give good attention. But some of you do not, or some of the children in your life live at a distance. And this is the beauty of the church – one of the only remaining intergenerational communities in our society! In practically nowhere else but the church do three-year-olds sing next to 90-year-olds, 80-year-olds teach 4-year-olds, and people who are 8, 40, and 75 serve side-by-side. Today in your bulletin, you see opportunities to volunteer in some way with children’s ministries here at Hamblen. Who knows? This may be your chance to scoot over and make room at the table for one more.