

“What Can A Child Teach Us About Being a Christian?”

St. Mark 9:30-37

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Hearing the reading of the gospel and considering the title of my sermon you might think that this was one of the last series on biblical youth sermons I forgot to deliver. I suppose it could be a prequel. It’s amazing how our children perceive their world and what they reason about it. They often have some unusual ways of imagining the world around them. For example: A little boy was attending his first wedding. After the service, his cousin asked him, “How many women can a man marry?” “Sixteen,” the boy responded. His cousin was amazed that he knew the answer so quickly. “How do you know that?” “Easy,” the little boy said. “All you have to do is add it up, like the Bishop said: 4 better, 4 worse, 4 richer, [and] 4 poorer.” Or, this story, Terri asked her children’s class to draw pictures of their favorite Bible stories. She was puzzled by Kyle’s picture, which showed four people on an airplane, so she asked him which story it was meant to represent. “The flight to Egypt,” said Kyle. “I see ... And that must be Mary, Joseph, and Baby Jesus,” Miss Terri said. “But who’s the fourth person?” “Oh, that’s Pontius-the Pilot.”¹

I probably should have titled this sermon better with something like “it’s Not All about Me” or something similar. On the other hand, the sermon is about us, and in a way *all about us*. My hope is that from this sermon today we will learn something new about how inevitable change can grow us nearer to Christ rather than cause debate that pushes us and others away from the church. Luke says that the disciples had an argument, but that is in the classic Greek term that means to debate a topic for discussion. On the other hand, in some instances can describe a plotting.

The story that we heard from Mark can be found in some form in all four of the gospels, though John only associates the lesson of the text to another scenario and not the rest of the narrative. Matthew and Luke begin the story differently. Matthew says that the disciples came to Jesus and wanted to know who would be the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. (18:1) Luke begins it this way, “And an argument arose among them as to which of them was the greatest. (Luke 9:46) Matthew and Mark say that a child was invited physically into the middle of the conversation. Luke is more specific saying that “when Jesus perceived the

¹ <https://www.atimetolaugh.org/kidschurchquotes.html> (accessed September 22, 2018).

thoughts of their hearts, he took a child and put them by his side and taught them the lesson about “it’s not all about me.” Whereas Matthew says that the disciples came to ask Jesus about who would be greatest, Mark and Luke agree that there was something in their hearts that was troubled Jesus.

Mark’s says that the story took place in Capernaum, on the shores of the Sea of Galilee. It was a port landing for travelers, and a good place to have a customs office. (Matthew 17:24-27 has the only story about the taxes exacted there in Capernaum.) The whole town was only about twelve acres in size, about twice the size of SAPC’s grounds today. The houses, like the one Jesus came to, were individual blocks of rooms situated around a central open area. Those who lived in the households were generally extended families. Most likely this was in the house of Peter. It is likely that the child was a known child among the household and not an unknown child in a village. It could also mean, from the historical context, that the child was socially invisible, or that the child may have been a household slave. The complementary text from Matthew suggests that Jesus may have been part of the household, since it was Peter who asked was asked by the tax collectors why Jesus did not pay what was called the half-shekel tax.

In all three gospel accounts, however, there is a consistency about the nature of the story and the moral that follows it. In a time when there was such a political uproar among the Jewish people who were historically in their homeland and the Roman government that had overwhelmed them by their military and political power. If Jesus did manage to usher in a new kingdom (and by that way eliminating the Roman government and corrupt Jewish operatives) then those who were formerly fisherfolk, now Jesus’s first echelon wanted to be heads of state, or at least cabinet members. Why? They were eager to establish a kingdom that ensured that traditional and historic structures in the Jewish countryside could be reclaimed and retained.

The lesson Jesus taught his disciples is based on his insight about what they were thinking about. Their hope was that they would reclaim the glory days of the past in which they would be able to reserve a special place for them ahead of time. Jesus wanted to teach them that it was not all about them, but about glorious days in the future. The coming day would not be predicated on the failed systems of the past (think partisan faith structures like the Judaism of Jesus’s day, like Pharisaism, temple corruption, or collusion with Rome, etc.) The new day would be devoted to the inclusion of those not yet recognized in society in the new order, just as the innocent child was not. This message is consistent across all four of the gospels. In the small patio, with a child in his arms, Jesus delivered a wonderful and frightening lesson at the same time. “It’s not all about you.” “it’s about what comes next.” Should you choose the new society that comes next, you have chosen me, and in so doing you have chosen God who sent me in the first place to

replace the old one.” What comes next means a society where even the most invisible person has the pre-eminent place at the table. Even a child, like this one from a fishing village who lived his young life in poverty, invisibility, or possibly even slavery.

We have all longed that things could be the way we imagine they always were. The “things” give us comfort. They insure us that if we can retrieve the past as it should have been, or even how we have constructed it in our memories, then we will know we are doing right. Obviously, the disciples so no harm in asking, or even fussing over it. But, also, there are negatives. Holding on to the past of our memories can be a way of holding on to unfair, even sinful privileges. It can mean that we would hold on to grudges from the past that might be forgotten were not holding on the past commemorates them in some way. Like the situation from the gospel reading it can mean that we disciples can lose sight of the vision that God has just ahead for us. It can mean that we have unintentionally, as did Jesus’s disciples, slipped into the dreaded “it’s all about me” mentality. In addition, it can mean that we can get into debates about changes that have little bearing on what will be true as God’s purpose becomes obvious in the future.

Just think about it. The child in the story taught us all that without having a single word recorded about what the child said about the situation. The future kingdom is near to us, even in our hearts, if we can confess any selfish notions that the kingdom of God in the future is “all about me.”