

Proper 22 Year B

“And he took the children in his arms, laid his hands on them and blessed them.”

A year or so ago Mary and I got involved with helping a mother and her young son. Part of her story, a story that became more and more complicated...part of her story was that she and her young elementary school age son had been thrown out of her mother's house. We paid for a motel room for a couple of nights; we took her to the doctor a couple of times....it seemed she had a number of other children and relatives or friends and would stay intermittently with the one willing to take them in at the time. When we met her she had been living in Birdville, the housing project near the interstate off Michigan Ave. She described trying to sleep with gunfire crackling during the night....how one night a bullet found its way into her bedroom.

She proudly told us what a good student her son was. He was soft spoken and very polite, but I wondered then as I wonder now, what kind of world will he grow up in; what kind of chance at a decent life will he have... he a child just like we all used to be.

Just over the last few weeks during our early morning walks, Katharine and I have walked past our old house on Texas Street, and across the street from it there is a mildly disheveled bungalow occupied by an intergenerational sizable family....the kind of disheveled house that dots the otherwise grand landscape of Oakleigh...and for several mornings their front door has been ajar and this beautiful little brown boy, maybe age two to three stands in the doorway and smiles and greets us on our walk....we've met the owner of the house who is retired military and owns some land up the country as he says...but my guess is that he has had to take care of generations of his kin...this little boy is most likely a great grandson given the age of the houses' owner....And I think again about what sort of chance for a full life will this young boy have...a child like you and I used to be.

Now we talked a couple of weeks ago about the different ways our modern western culture views the child compared to the way the culture of Palestine in the first century views the child. In our world we have a romantic, sentimental view. We think of them as innocent, wide open to the joys of life, protected from the brute reality of the world....upon them we project our own hopes for a life of success and happiness....We have the luxury of placing a whole lot of emotional energy on them...It's just the way we are....but in the first century Mediterranean world children were viewed

quite differently...they had no social status, many were sold as slaves in order for their families to survive...they were mostly considered a burden... their life expectancy was 50% to reach two years of age...they were the most at risk social group in their world, the most vulnerable...they were throwaways for all practical purposes.

In our gospel reading for today this is the second time in just a few verses that Jesus uses the image of the child...the child being the symbol of all the outcasts and marginalized of our world, a symbol of the world's vulnerable...he tells his disciples in our reading two weeks ago, that whoever receives the child receives him and the father who sent him...the disciples of course don't get it...as they never get it in Mark's gospel... because in our reading for today the disciples "speak sternly" to the children, other translations say they "rebuke" the children from entering the house in which Jesus is teaching...the teaching had been on the legality of divorce, which I believe is a bookend teaching to the teachings on children...women having social status just slightly above that of children...that they could be written off no less so than sold property...so Jesus here is in no small way challenging the social norms of his day...Jesus' mission according to Mark is clearly directed first towards the marginalized of our world, and he is demanding social change.

But Jesus says something in this passage stunning to me, and it jives with the first teaching on the child a few verses earlier...He says that unless you receive the kingdom as a child then you will not enter the kingdom... now I and I'm sure you have always heard this preached this way... remembering our modern western predispositions about children...that we are to come to God and God's kingdom as wide-eyed innocent unblemished enthusiastic naive children...that makes us comfortable...we just have to don a childlike faith, unquestioning, exuberant and with a childlike trust that all manner of thing is well...but that is not what Jesus is saying here...the Greek is in the accusative (are you impressed?)...and I won't bore you with explaining that,...but what Jesus is actually saying is that we are to receive the kingdom... the kingdom as a child...the kingdom is the child...now that's quite a different matter...Jesus indeed receives the children (against the protestations of his disciples, who according to this teaching risk themselves being excluded from the kingdom...remember, they've just had the argument about who will be the greatest)...Jesus receives the children and lays hands on them and blesses them...raises them, they the least of us, raises them to a place of honor and dignity...so welcoming the kingdom of God is welcoming those whose status we don't share...welcoming the commonweal of God is receiving and blessing/dignifying those of little or no

status... that is the means Jesus tells us, the means of welcome and blessing, the means of entering into this countercultural way of living in which mercy and justice and peace and love will flow like a mighty river.

Sadly, even in our own modern wealthy part of the world, we are more and more encountering the dispossessed child...as the middle class shrinks, more and more fall into poverty and dishonor...we see the violent symptoms all around us...Another thing that this gospel is saying I think is that this commonweal, this reign of God is not an end, but always nascent, always forming, emerging, always about potential and hope and promise... like that smiling little boy on Texas street...the kingdom, a dispossessed child, but a child nonetheless full of hope and possibility, if but welcomed out of the world's brute reality, welcomed home... And just how do we welcome and bless the child among us...just how do we welcome and bless the weakest, which Jesus says is the way to the kingdom...this way of receiving, welcome and blessing...so what might be the "means to the means", recognizing that the commonweal is not an end, but a beginning of new possibility...what might be the way we enter the nascent process of the commonweal that is process?...How about adequately funding quality education for all...How about adequate healthcare for all...Those two things alone would welcome, receive and dignify a vast segment of our population...How about peacemaking abroad in lieu of senseless violence... violence that always affects the child first...Jesus' metaphor more and more operative in our own day...how about food and clothing and water and the prevention of disease in the so-called two thirds world...all of these things affect the child first: The child, the very kingdom of God lying in wait. No, we are to have faith that is not childlike, but **mature**...mature to recognize that in receiving and blessing the weak is our own salvation.

Entering God's gracious world is to receive and bless our least... scripture cries out for it. It is our baptismal call...As we make our way on this earthly pilgrimage may God give us full hearts and arms of welcome and hands of blessing...that is all the world needs for things to begin their turning to God's vision of creation, this new day waiting to be born...Today we welcome and bless in our midst another one who will learn by God's grace the art of welcome and blessing...Owen in your maturing, you are to welcome our least and bless them, and that makes you a world changer...as all of us are called to be...world changers, midwives of God's commonweal... So, we're a month from our national election, one of our great privileges in our country to be world changers, and I'm going to make an endorsement right here and now ...I'm going to vote for the child.