

## Proper 20 Year B

Several years ago I was privileged to serve on a panel to lead a discussion on race relations in Mobile. This gathering was held on the campus of the University of South Alabama. There were probably a hundred plus in the room, a decidedly diverse group.

I still remember poignantly my impressions that day. Three fourths, I'd say, of the audience were students.... One young woman, a student, who was white, stood up, obviously moved by the conversation, and stated, her voice shaking, that she was homosexual, and that her parents had rejected her for that, kicked her out of the house....another young woman, a black student, told us that in order to help her parents pay her tuition, she was working at a fast food restaurant... and amid tears she told us that a group of teens showed up one night and called her the "n" word... and then while she was not looking they threw a cup of water at her.... Hearing them speak one could feel the pain of what it means to be hated out of prejudice and what it means to be marginalized... a feeling most of us can't know, because of our privilege.... White, straight, male, for example... we are insulated against such marginalization.... But to see people, who, to me are children, suffer the indignity and shame of being hated was just heart-breaking.

In today's gospel reading Jesus places a child in the midst of his disciples and tells them whoever welcomes the child, welcomes him, and that whoever welcomes him welcomes God.... Now in our culture of the "helicopter parent"... we have

romanticized and sentimentalized children... we see them as pure innocence, unlimited potential, eager to receive what the world has to offer them; they are put on a lofty pedestal... but in the ancient world the opposite was true. It's hard to get our post-modern minds around that... children were the lowest of the social order, often unwanted, considered a burden.... Many nobles, and want-to-be nobles sold their children into slavery... and would later adopt a more presentable young adult as heir.... The fact that a child would be in the midst of a group of men in a teaching context and not out of sight being cared for by the women would be unthinkable in this world... so Mark in the persona of Jesus is breaking boundaries again. He is making a dramatic example of the child as metaphor for all the marginalized, all the vulnerable, all the outcasts of our world.... Mark's principal theme has to do with the vocation of the Baptized... so here we have our marching orders, that it is for us to receive the child, which is to say that we are to receive the vulnerable, the outcast, the one of low social position... the sick and infirm.... the poverty stricken; the addicted; the disabled; the aged, the untouchables of our world. The Liberation theologians of the mid-twentieth century called these the world's "non-persons." The stunning theological premise here is that to welcome one such as these outcasts is to welcome God. In other words, to experience the presence of God in our lives, we are to welcome as equals the ones whom we fear most; the ones we'd rather not see... the ones stowed away out of our sight... like refugees and detained immigrants, and prisoners; our elderly; our mentally ill; our poor; our addicted brothers and sisters. To

receive ones such as these is to receive God.... This is not a teaching about charity. This is about welcome.

This is also a teaching about power, a predominant theme in Mark... you remember that this encounter with the child takes place just after the disciples are arguing about who was the greatest among Jesus' followers... presumably, who would reign supreme in this hoped for coming new world order in which the overlords are cast down, and the occupied people are freed.... They are of course fantasizing about worldly power....and the disciples' lack of understanding leads Jesus to remind them that true power...true power that changes the world... power that is of God... is the power of Love, that is, power that comes from sacrifice and service and self giving... that true power comes from welcoming the child.... Power that makes its way into the hierarchical structures of our world is dangerous... inevitably corrupted, self-interested, violent... we only have to look at our institutions: government, corporations, prisons, school systems, healthcare.... But in God's imagination power must always be shared, given away, as it were... to empower the least, to empower the vulnerable, the lost, the outcast... the proverbial children among us, is to let God's life loose in the world.... Power must be at equilibrium for a society to sustain itself... power, wealth a symbol thereof, must be redistributed.... There is no greater, no more authentic welcome, than yielding one's power to one who lacks it. The world believes otherwise. And we, brothers and sisters are called to be in the world, not of it.

Ironically enough in this country the largest segment of the population living in poverty is literally children... 21% of them live below the poverty line in this the

wealthiest nation on earth... that is unconscionable.... We say we love our children, but they are the most at risk segment of our population. And let us not forget that our government has spent millions separating children from their families. Immigrant families still suffer separation and abuse under the banner of security. But in reality, the abuse is caused by our xenophobic predisposition that has plagued our world by the powerful for millennia. Even now it continues to be a talking point among those on the far right, to fear the “great replacement;” that is to say the replacement of white people by people of color. The Trump campaign makes a living at playing the xenophobia card. A politics of fear. Trump is exploiting our greatest weakness, our fear of the other. That too is unconscionable. Our treatment of the immigrant, of blacks, of gay and lesbian and transgender folks, of women, of the poor, is not mere ignorance. It is intentional. It’s easy to forget the plight of the marginalized with the short attention span of the news cycle. But suffice it to say that the so-called least of our world are at dire risk.... So perhaps things haven’t in fact changed all that much after all.... There still exists profound suffering among the powerless.... God save the child.

The Greek root word for xenophobia appears and reappears throughout the Septuagint.... The Septuagint is the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible written in Egypt around two hundred B.C.E, which is the text drawn from by the New Testament writers... and the word appears and reappears throughout the gospel literature and in the letters of the New Testament... and that root word is *xenos*.... It’s the root word for stranger, from which we get the word xenophobia, fear of stranger....but quite

amazingly, and paradoxically, it is also the root word for welcome as well.... The prophets and sages of scripture over centuries have put their finger on something profoundly important about us as the human species. They're talking about this so-called crimp in our DNA... a learned imprint in our genetic makeup that causes us to fear the stranger, fear the other.... I believe it is due to millennia of violence... bred into our species, imprinted upon our DNA... fear of the other, which has evoked all manner of violence and oppression in human history. Perhaps it is a chicken and the egg argument: fear begetting violence, and violence begetting fear; but needless to say, it is a vicious cycle. If there is a so-called fall from grace, then I think that is it... that insidious crimp in our DNA that we have acquired by a collective rote memory of violence... we see the manifestation of such fear all over the world... the child in this passage is the symbol of the other, the other that is outcast, the other, the weakest among us... the other that is powerless... the other of color.... The other that we fear... We, all humanity, continue to exploit and abase the weak and least among us. Have you noticed that it is always the weak, the powerless who bear the brunt of violence first...? It is always the weak and powerless who suffer the most from natural disaster. That is not an accident. Is it our fear of sacrificing our self-interest that projects such a shadow upon those who least deserve it? The mystery here is that we are closer to God when we welcome the least among us; that God is mysteriously present in the vulnerable of our world. That God finds God's personhood in the non-person. It follows then,

... If we are not present to our poor and our least, then we are not present to God. Our life's work is to heal the tension between the fear of the stranger, and the art of welcome. Remember, Love casts out fear. Love is the rubric of our lives.

We are being given our baptismal bearings here, lest we think the way of the world is normal and acceptable. Jesus is telling us here that to welcome the child... to welcome the stranger, to welcome the other, even our enemies... to welcome the abased and undignified, requires a continuous and courageous practice of vulnerability.... And Jesus is saying that to practice such vulnerability in the art of welcome is the very means of the world's salvation;... and until all are welcomed into the circle of dignity, the human circle of welcome, then none of us have a right to stand there, and we will all continue to stand under the aegis of fear.... In welcoming the child, we welcome the light of Christ which casts out all fear for the welcomed, and the ones who welcome....

I wonder where those two girls are now whose despair I witnessed a few years ago. I wonder if they have received the gift of welcome. I wonder if they know that they are worthy of Love. In praying for the children of our world, I pray for them.... May God bless us in our sacred welcoming.... May God bless, empower, and save the child; may God restore all the non-persons to personhood.... And may we have the courage to be the means.