

Proper 22 Year B 2024

Years ago... ten, twelve... the time gets away, I got involved with helping a mother and her young son. Part of her story, a story that became more and more complex as she told it... the more she shared her story the more I knew, appallingly, that she lived in a world about which I had no experience or knowledge.... Part of her story was that she and her young elementary school age son had been thrown out of her mother's house. I paid for a motel room for a couple of nights; and even gave her a ride to a doctor's appointment.... Just a drop of help in a sea of despair. She had other children living with relatives or friends and she and her son would stay intermittently with the one willing to take them in at the time. When I met her she had just been evicted from the housing project near the interstate off Michigan Ave. All of that housing is gone now. She described trying to sleep with gunfire crackling during the night... how one night she was awakened by a bullet rattling off the walls of her bedroom.

She proudly told me what a good student her son was. He was soft spoken, soft in every way, 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. He and his mother are many in our world, I thought... so many of the despairing in spite of a world teeming with abundance. That's not right.

Twice now, Mark has Jesus speaking of children. 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 viewed 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, a life of self-sufficiency.... We have the luxury of placing a whole lot of emotional energy on them... 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... children were mostly considered a burden...their life expectancy was one in three 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. And still, even today children are the most at risk segment of our society. The poorest segment, to put a finer point on it. That's not right.

In our gospel reading for today this is, as I said, the second time in just a few verses that Jesus uses the image of the child in his teaching. Mark obviously thinks this is important... the child being the symbol of all the outcasts and marginalized of our world, a symbol of the world's vulnerable.... Jesus told 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. They are blinded by their biases and distractions.... We know they don't get it 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 not unlike livestock or property. There was no alimony. Divorced women were condemned to a life of poverty and shame... so Jesus here is in no small way challenging the social norms of his day, challenging the injustice of his very tradition.... Jesus' mission according to Mark is clearly directed first towards the marginalized of our world, here women and children... He is teaching that God's law has been subverted by a system of injustice. A system ruled by our "hardness of heart." That same hardness of heart in our own culture is manifest in an appalling lack of empathy. In fact, that lack of empathy has been institutionalized.

But Jesus says something in this passage stunning to me.... He says that unless you receive the kingdom of God as a child, then you will not enter the kingdom... now I, and I'm sure you, have always heard this passage 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... we just have to don a childlike faith, unquestioning, exuberant and with a childlike trust that all manner of thing will be well.... The church has, alas, so sentimentalized the life of faith... a comfortable and private faith... but that is not what Jesus is saying here... the Greek is in the accusative... and I won't bore you with explaining that... but what Jesus is actually saying is that we are to receive the kingdom as one would receive a child.... Receive 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, whom you remember, had just been arguing 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.... The kingdom of God is embodied if you will, by the lives of the poor and the marginalized... welcoming God's kingdom of equals is receiving and blessing, that is to say, dignifying those of little or no status... that is the means of salvation Jesus tells us.... The kingdom of God is in the receiving. Salvation is the process, the practice, of welcome and blessing.... Salvation means entering into a countercultural way of living in which mercy and justice and peace and love flow like a mighty river, from the bottom up. The improbable mystery here is that God's kingdom sets its roots among the poor, the weak, the vulnerable and the shamed. It is no wonder that our culture is so unsatisfied with religion; that it pines for meaning.... Oh, if only I could find God.... We've just been looking for the truth of God in all the wrong places. The kingdom of God is not some utopian future, nor a dazzling moment of ecstatic awareness. It is before us, here and now, in the lives of the outcasts and marginalized.

Brothers and sisters, the streets of the kingdom of God are not paved with gold.... The streets of the kingdom have potholes, no curbs, broken street lights, dysfunctional drainage. The mansions of God's kingdom are no mansions at all, but housing projects, and dilapidated tenements with broken windows and rusted

plumbing. The citizens of God's kingdom wait at the borders, borderlines even within our own city, looking for a dignified life, struggling not to despair. The kingdom of God is being bombed in Gaza and Lebanon. The kingdom of God suffers under the vainglorious auspices of white privilege.

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 indignity... we see the violent symptoms all around us.... But Jesus is teaching us that the reign of God is not an end, but always beginning, always forming, emerging, always about possibility and hope and promise.... Contingent on the mere good manners of welcome... not unlike that mother's little boy on the run, seeking shelter; seeking a way just to say, "I am"... the kingdom of God, a dispossessed child, but that child, our hope.... And so the question always becomes... just how do we welcome and bless the weakest, whom Jesus says is the way to the kingdom... this way of receiving, welcome and blessing... what might be the "means to the means?".... How about adequately funding quality education for all.... How about adequate healthcare for all... How about daycare for the working poor. A livable wage. How about taking in, or offering support to an asylum seeker, on the run from poverty and the violence that comes with it. How about affordable housing? Those 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.... Almost a majority of those killed in Gaza and Lebanon are children. 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: But perhaps most important is to simply grant welcome and dignity to one of the least of these, one at a time.; one in our own place, the one so near to us.... That simple act may be the radical beginning of things just and good. It is a profound irony that it is the poor and the marginalized who are free from the illusions of self-sufficiency. They see the world as it is. We need them.

The child, the least... the very kingdom of God, languishing for so long now, dying to live.... No, we are not to have faith that is childlike; we are to embrace a mature faith, a faith with empathy at its heart. Paul tells us that there comes a time to put away childish things... we are to have the maturity to recognize that in receiving and blessing the weak, the outcast, the lost, is our own salvation.

Entering God's gracious life 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 for 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; this entrance into the land of dignity, well-being, and justice....

It might all be so simple as the mere practice of hospitality, a virtue continually extolled in both Hebrew and New Testament scripture. Hospitality is the practice of setting one's self aside in order to allow the stranger, the other, to be

present... to be present... to make persons of the non-person. And good people,
that presence is the very kingdom of God, full of possibility; full of gratitude and
joy... and truth.... And waiting; waiting so long for a mere embrace.