

2024 Proper 20B

I really love the ways in which our children here are included in worship. A few months ago, Rosemary was telling someone at Bethel House Church all about it. I pointed out to her that she has been a big part of making that happen. She just started inviting one of our church kids join her at the lectern. It seemed to surprise her to realize she was the one who got that started. She didn't realize that all it took was making space for them.

Last week in Sunday School I asked a question and William gave this beautiful, theologically sound and nuanced answer. I responded with some surprise, and he said, quite seriously, "Just because I'm not looking at you in church doesn't mean I'm not listening to you."

We can be a little sentimental about having children in church, seeing it as something sweet or cute, rather than these children exercising their God-given gifts in the same way the adults do. They are present, and they are paying attention. They are listening to us. They are taking note of the things we do and say. They notice how we treat each other. They are learning from us, even when we're not actively teaching. That's part of why it's important to me that they spend time in worship with us every Sunday. So that they absorb these rhythms of the liturgy. So that they develop a working vocabulary of faith.

We have an odd attitude about children in general, in our culture. Politicians are great about using them as talking points at rallies...and terrible about passing legislation that will actually protect and provide for them. You don't need me to stand here and rant—I have other points to make this morning. We have a responsibility to the children in our midst, not only because they are the “next” generation, but because they are part of who we are as people NOW. Or as a friend of mine taught me a long time ago, “Children aren't the FUTURE of the church—they are part of its PRESENT!”

But as passionate as I feel about the topic of children in church, that isn't really what Jesus was concerned with in the passage we get from the Gospel today. Jesus wasn't trying to make a case for children to be included in worship services.

Jesus was trying to make a point about power and powerlessness. The disciples had been arguing about who was ‘the greatest,’ about who would have the most power and prestige, when Jesus came into his glory. They thought he was going to be some earthly war hero, and they were vying for who got to sit next to him and look important. They were trying to snatch up the ‘power seat’ so that they could look and feel important.

Jesus is trying to make them understand that they are missing the point, if they are still thinking about earthly power. He leads a child into their midst because a child, in that culture, was the LEAST powerful human being. I

have mentioned before that women were really at the bottom of the power barrel. That is true. Children aren't at the bottom of the power barrel—they are in the cracks in the wood of the barrel itself. A child was invisible in the circles of power. Oh, there would be the occasional prince born who would throw people into a tizzy, but that was only because the boy had the potential for future power, once he grew up and inherited the kingdom.

The point Jesus is trying to make is that we are not to value people because of what they can do for us. The point is that we are to value people because each one of them is made in the image of God—even the smallest child. Jesus is making the point that we are valued by God not because of our power, but despite it. We are powerless to FORCE God to love us. All we can do is try to reach back to God, in response to the love poured out on us.

We hate being powerless. We hate having to rely on another person for anything, much less everything. It's part of why we dislike being in the hospital or sick at home. It's one of the hardest parts of growing old, I'm told. But there is something sacred in those moments when we allow another person to love us despite our powerlessness. It's a moment of grace when we finally learn that we are loved not because of what we are able to do, but because we simply ARE.

If we go too far into that direction, of course, we run into dangerous ground. We can overdose on the knowledge that God loves us as we are, and forget that the appropriate response is to try to reach out to others in love. We run the danger of becoming so enamored with our own new-found righteousness that we forget it's a gift, and not earned. We start arguing about who is the MOST righteous, who is the MOST powerful, as though we had any control over it. We get caught up in our own plans and lose sight of what God is really doing in the world.

The good news is, God doesn't let us go on for too long. Eventually, Jesus stops and looks at us and says, "So what was that you were arguing about?" And when we finally 'fess up that we were ONCE AGAIN arguing about who was the most special of all, Jesus sits down, and calls us to him, and gently teaches us a lesson about what is really important in the kingdom of God. He reminds us that God's kingdom isn't fueled by power and prestige and importance, but by love and service to one another. We are closest to the "power seat" when we recognize the image of God in the one who seems least likely. A man hanging broken and alone on a cross. A child making noises in church. A smelly homeless woman begging for some money on the street. You, in your most frightened and vulnerable hour. You, when you suddenly see there isn't much difference between you and that man, or woman or child.

Whoever wants to be first must be last of all, and servant of all. Amen.