

## Lectionary 25 B 2021

Dove of Peace Lutheran Church

Pastor Stephen Springer

September 19, 2021

Mark 9:30-37

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dear Friends:

We are singing a very fine and very well loved hymn today. A Swedish hymn. “Children of the Heavenly Father.” It is an exceptionally fine case of Lutheran tune, Lutheran text, and Lutheran translation. Not a song that you are likely to sing in any church except a Lutheran one.

Two weeks from today, we will sing another children’s song. “Jesus Loves Me.” Which is an American hymn from 1859. Published only four years after the Swedish one. The Swedish one came out in Sweden in 1855, although it wasn’t published in America in English until 1925.

So why are we singing two children’s songs two weeks apart? The answer is that Jesus uses children to make a point one chapter apart in Mark’s gospel. So as we move along through Mark’s gospel, we get a child today, used by Jesus to make a point. And we get children two weeks from today, in the next chapter of Mark, chapter ten, used by Jesus to make a point. The reading two weeks from today is, I suspect, the better known story. Because it involves Jesus blessing children. And it includes these words, which are famous in their King James Version: “*Suffer the little children to come unto me, and forbid them not: for of such is the kingdom of God.*”

So Jesus twice expresses an appreciation for children in this section of the gospel. And we encounter those appreciations today, and again two weeks from today. These occur in a stretch of Mark in which Jesus keeps teaching about the suffering that he says he must undergo. And the disciples keep missing the point. They seem unable to understand. And not only do they not understand, they keep striving to outdo each other, and to fantasize about the glory and power and wealth that they will gain because of their association with Jesus. And so in today’s gospel reading, it says in verse 32: “*They did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him.*” And Jesus asks them what they were arguing about on the road, and it says in verse 34: “*But they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another who was the greatest.*” So with very few words, Mark paints a picture of a kind of dysfunction in this group. These twelve men are sort of vying for dominance and greatness, and yet they are afraid and ashamed to tell Jesus about it. They are traveling down the road, thirteen men walking along, now on their way to Jerusalem. We are 65 verses away from Holy Week, from Jesus’ arrival—his final arrival—in Jerusalem. So they are walking along, spread out along the road. Probably relying on the hospitality of strangers. And they’ve reached Capernaum, and they are in somebody’s house.

And there is this kid there. A *paidion*, Mark's Greek word that means a little child, either boy or girl.

And he takes this kid— that's the first verb— he takes this kid. And he stands the kid— that's the second verb— in the middle. You can kind of picture Jesus with his twelve disciples gathered around. And then he takes the kid in his arms— that's the last verb. *Enagkalizomai*. A six syllable verb that means to take into your arms. Essentially, to hug. So he takes this kid, stands the kid in the middle, and puts his arms around him. And we'll have that hugging verb again, with the kids two weeks from now. And then Jesus says, "*Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.*" And that's the message of the day. Welcoming the child. So today's message has a "whoever." "*Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.*" And two weeks from today, we get another "whoever." "*Whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it.*" So we have two stories involving children. The point today is to welcome the children. The point two weeks from today is to be like a child, to be childlike in receiving the kingdom of God. And by the way, two weeks from today, the disciples will be shooing away the children. Having not listened and not learned today's lesson. This section of Mark's gospel should just be called "Disciples Acting Badly." The second half of chapter eight, then all of chapters nine and ten. Disciples Acting Badly. Disciples Being Jerks.

What Jesus teaches today is that we should welcome and appreciate those who are overlooked. Because in his society in that time, children were not as well regarded or as well protected as they are in a modern society like ours. In particular, a child cannot do anything for you or grant anything to you. The disciples acting badly are interested in Jesus because of what he can do for them. But the child cannot give you money or power or prestige. The child just is. Just part of God's world. And by hugging the child, Jesus is demonstrating the value of the child. We hug for many reasons, but one reason we hold on to someone or something is because it is very valuable to us and we don't want to let it go. A hug is affection, but it is also validation. We hug things that are valuable.

This whole section of "Disciples Acting Badly" begins with Jesus rebuking Peter, and saying to Peter, "*Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.*" The disciples continue to talk about power and riches and glory, even while Jesus keeps talking about the exact opposite. They are setting their minds not on divine things, but on human things. They see opportunities for themselves. They want to view and value people as instruments, in terms of what others can do for me. But that's not how God sees it. God's view— what Jesus calls divine things— is of the intrinsic value of his creation, especially the intrinsic value of each human life. Such as the life of the child that Jesus has wrapped his arms around, and placed in the middle of the group. *This* is what's valuable, Jesus is saying. Not all that other stuff.

Our society and our culture place an economic value on our lives. We are consumers. We are producers. Or we are both consumers and producers. Valued as customers. Valued as essential workers. Valued as labor. It's so pervasive in our society— not just in the marketplace, but in the corruption of education, health care, the arts, and yes, the church. But this is human things, not divine things. This is the human view, not the divine view. The divine view sees things differently.

*“Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.”* It may not be a child. It may be the guy who trims the bushes, or the maid who cleans the hotel room. It may be the person who sits forgotten in a nursing home. It may be the teenager without friends, or the old lady who has too many cats in her house. We are challenged to see them as God sees them. To set our minds on divine things. *“Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.”* Amen.