

Text: Mark 9: 30-37  
Title: Welcoming God  
Date: 09.02.09  
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In the late fifties and early sixties the Englewood neighborhood began to change. A few “colored” families crossed the boundaries and moved into what was a white-working-class-ethnic-enclave. I recently read a story by one of those first African-American boundary crossers, the author was Bob Price.

Bob came from a church-going family that valued education, the arts, and hard work. He was taught that Martin Luther King’s vision of a just and integrated community was the will and way of God and that segregation was evil. So, in keeping with those values his parents enrolled him at Saint Leo, an all male, predominately Irish, Catholic high school, with 450 students. There were five “negro boys” enrolled. The school scattered those five students into different classes. When they went to class they went alone.

In first period algebra Father Hennessy assigned seats in alphabetical order ~ except for Bob, who he put front row center. And, then every day when he took roll Father Hennessy intentionally mispronounced Bob’s name. If Bob didn’t answer to the wrong name he was punished. In Bob’s words:

*He would hit me five times on the hand or butt with a drumstick for not answering when he called my pseudo name. He was 6 foot and 180 pounds; I was only 120 pounds at the time. The other students thought it was funny and would laugh when I tried to get him to use my true name, after awhile I gave up trying.*

Bob’s stories in science, english, and baseball are similar. Eventually, he pleaded with his mother to send him to a different school, and when his mother relented Saint Leo transferred him with five failing grades. What unfolds is a remarkable story of recovery, hard work, and hope....

There is also a delightful side-story about Father Hennessy bending a young man over a desk for corporeal punishment ~ except that after a few raps with the drum stick the boy turned and dropped the good Father with a hard right cross.

But, what is more remarkable is that tucked away in Bob’s story is a different Father, Father Hayes ~ an Irish priest that came to Englewood after serving in Texas among Mexican immigrants. Father Hayes welcomed Bob and offered acceptance, encouragement, good humor, and a sense of family. Again, in Bob’s words:

*....we loved Father Hayes because he saw hope in us, and treated us like fully human beings made in the image of God. If it were not for that glimpse of the Kingdom of God in a little Catholic Parish in Englewood, I would probably have given up on the notion of true integration altogether.*

Maybe you have a Father Hayes in your life.  
Maybe you remember somebody who saw you, valued you, encouraged you, and welcomed you.  
Maybe you remember somebody who embodied for you the Kingdom of God.

For me it was Al Knapp. He was a long, lanky, and altogether goofy student at Michigan State University who wanted to name his first child "Take-a." When I was in junior high, Al saw me, valued me, encouraged me, and welcomed me. Now, granted I had a huge crush on his wife, but Al Knapp embodied the Kingdom for me. And, when I was a late-adolescent-mess with no idea what to do I remember at least knowing what I wanted to be. I wanted to be like Al Knapp.

Last year at a Kennedy Center event honoring contributions to the arts the comedian Jack Black was asked to recognize the rock band "The Who." In that speech Jack Black said:

*When I was 10, I fell in love with the Who. I saw Tommy and was deeply moved. I wasn't deaf, dumb or blind, but I wanted to be felt, seen, heard and healed. Seriously, I'm not going for laughs here ... When I first heard them in 1979, it hit me like a torpedo in my third eye.*

Every child wants to be felt, seen, heard, and healed.  
Every child wants to be welcomed.  
Every child needs a Father Hayes or an Al Knapp.  
Maybe that is all that Jesus is getting at in this morning's text....

Jesus is on the way to Jerusalem. The text has movement, not just movement through Galilee on the road that ran through Capernaum, but movement toward the cross.

The disciples, after hearing Jesus again reference dying and rising, have no idea where they are heading or what to make of what Jesus was saying. And so, maybe in their uncertainty, they fall back on a familiar debate: Who is the greatest?

We often assume that they were talking about who was greatest among their company, but the text can be read much more broadly. Who is the greatest?

They are students comparing GPAs.  
They are athletes comparing accomplishments.  
They are businessmen comparing portfolios.  
They are mothers comparing children and activities.  
They are pastors comparing spiritual sizzle.

When Jesus asks them what they were talking about their embarrassed silence is deafening. So, Jesus sits down ~ he assumes the position of a teacher. This was not just polite public chit-chat as they walked, this was an intimate teaching moment.

*If you want to be first, you must be last, and the servant to all...*

And then he calls over a child (don't know if it was a boy or girl, the Greek word is gender neutral.)

*Do you see this child?*

*When you see this child you see me.*

*Whoever welcomes this child welcomes me.*

*Whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me.*

The child is a stand in for Jesus.

The child is a stand in for God.

Oh! And the word for welcome ~ *dexomai* ~ is not just a generic welcome, but literally taking into ones arms. Not unlike a father running down the road with wide open arms to welcome home a prodigal son.

Father Hayes welcomed Bob Price and in doing so welcomed God.

Al Knapp welcomed me and in doing so welcomed God.

Who welcomed you and in doing so welcomed God?

Who is welcoming your children and in doing so welcoming God?

Who are you welcoming and in doing so welcoming God?

Now, there is something about the central image of this text that is as cute and cuddly as a puppy and the neighbor kids.

This is the familiar Jesus. This is the Jesus that we know ~ not the one who refers to a Gentile woman as a "dog" or calls Peter "Satan." This is the Jesus who loves all the little children of the world ~ red and yellow, black and white, they are precious in his sight. This is the Jesus that makes sense.

But, what if there is something here that is  
more subversive,  
more perplexing,  
more provocative?

John Pilch in writing about the world of Jesus notes that children were low on the list of priorities. Mediterranean patriarchal cultures, as late as the Middle Ages, didn't place a high value on children. Thomas Aquinas is to have taught that in a raging fire a husband was obliged to save his father first, then his mother, next his wife, and last of all his young child.

To our sensibilities that is so incredulous that it must be wrong, or at the very least overstated. Children are our future, our prize, and our hope. In contemporary American culture children are meant to be extensions of our best selves....

But, what if the point is that Jesus is not just talking about children, but he is talking about place and power.

Jesus says that when you welcome the last, the least, or the littlest you welcome me.

When you welcome without regard of status,  
without regard of reciprocity,  
without regard of income or influence,  
without regard of image,  
without regard of self....

When you welcome simply because they bear the image of God ~ you welcome the image. You welcome God.

On his way to the cross, Jesus pulls aside those who he knew and loved the best and once again reframes creation for them. Now, what is striking to me is that he doesn't hold up belief or doctrinal purity or issues of piety, but he says that in the economy of God what matters is not power, place, or pretense but simply the image of God.

For that is how God sees us ~  
not for what we do or what we offer,  
but for who we are as image bearers of God ~  
created, called, and claimed by Christ.

This morning we begin a new season of Sunday school; GEMS and Cadets get started in a few weeks; "God Loves Me" and "Children in Worship" have begun new curriculum cycles; YEEPS is getting rolling; the Little Lambs of the Mom's Group has begun....

In all over those places may children be seen, and heard, and felt, and healed ~ not for who they are or what they offer, but simply because they are image bearers of God. And may every teacher, and every helper, and every one with a child under foot welcome them.

Do you want to welcome God?  
Barbara Brown Taylor writes:

*Then get down on the floor with little Sarah over there. Get fingerpaint all over your clothes and laugh at her dumb jokes and never mind that you have more important things to do, like finishing the laundry or earning a living. She is not filler. She is the main event. Opening yourself up to her is better for your soul than finishing a project or getting a raise or even reading a whole book of the Bible.*

Dear friends, may we encounter the last, the least, or the littlest, may we open our arms and find there in our embrace ~ God.  
Amen.