

On the Way to the Kingdom



Mark 9:30-37

Jesus and his disciples went on from there and passed through Galilee. He did not want anyone to know it; for he was teaching his disciples, saying to them, "The Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him, and three days after being killed, he will rise again." But the disciples did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him.

Then they came to Capernaum; and when he was in the house he asked them, "What were you arguing about on the way?" But they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another who was the greatest.

So he sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all." Then he took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms, he said to them, "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me."

Jesus and his disciples are walking through Galilee... and they have come to Peter's house for the night.

Jesus is moving quietly through the countryside, because he needs time to teach his disciples the Way. I don't mean the way to Jerusalem – they knew *that* way – but his Way of discipleship. Jesus wants to build a community which understands and lives the Way of the kingdom – but the disciples aren't a community yet, and they're having trouble understanding what he means.

He's already told them that to follow his Way they must deny themselves – deny their own ambitions, let go of their hopes for success, let go of their need to be important. But on the road to Capernaum, house, they weren't talking about how to let go of their egos, but arguing about their relative importance – about who would be greatest in Jesus' coming kingdom! They just didn't get it.

Do we get it?

At the end of the day, when they entered Peter's house, Jesus tried another way to get through to them. Seeing a little child in the corner of the room, he took it in his arms and said, "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me..." Notice that Jesus didn't just *point* to a child to teach a lesson; he picked up the child and held him in his arms. This child is not just an object lesson; this child is loved.

So what is it about children that Jesus wants us to understand?

- Children have no influence, no power over others.
- Children have nothing; everything they own has been given to them.
- Children have everything to learn and (supposedly) nothing yet to teach us.
- Children cannot help others (we think) but need help from adults....

Here's a beautiful description of the gifts children give us – and in this prayer we will ask God to give gifts to the newly baptized:

*Give them an **inquiring and discerning heart**;
the **courage to will and to persevere**,
a **spirit to know and to love you**,
and the **gift of joy and wonder** in all your works.
BCP p. 308*

The gifts of joy and wonder... the gift of an inquiring and discerning heart... the gift of courage... the gift of perseverance... these are the qualities children share with us.

(And, yes – children can be egotists, too... There's nothing like a two-year-old for saying “me, me, me” and “that's mine!” Sometimes the only power a child has is to make noise.... and sometimes the noise is loud enough to get what she wants....

I'm thinking back to my lunches with college students in Oberlin.... From 12 to 20 students came in the kitchen door on Mondays, made sandwiches on the kitchen counter, grabbed a drink, and then moved on to the living room where they ate, talked, and debated interesting questions....

These were young people from every denomination, and other from no religious background at all.... They were coming to church on Sundays for the liturgy, the music, the sacraments, the preaching....

They were coming to lunch on Mondays for the food, and the friendship, and the pleasure of being in a home... But they were also curious about Christianity, and wanted to know what I believed as an Episcopalian...

I was always the last one to make my sandwich, and then I would come into the living room, and join the conversation. There they would be, crammed onto the sofas, perched in the chairs.... I usually ended up sitting on the floor.

But there was one girl who always sat in ‘her’ chair – a big, plush wing chair by the fireplace... Others soon learned she would make snide remarks if they sat in ‘her’ chair So they learned to leave the chair empty for her. This girl always made a noise loud enough to get what she wanted!

A ‘tradition’ soon developed at these lunches – someone would ask me a ‘hard question’ as soon as I took a bite of my sandwich. There was no way to talk with a mouth full of ham and cheese! And that turned out to be a good thing.

The very first time I was asked a ‘hard question’ I was asked, “Why do Episcopalians baptize children?”

I looked around the group that day, and I saw students who were Catholic, Episcopal, Presbyterian, Methodist, Lutheran ... all of them baptized as babies, all familiar with churches at home where babies were baptized. And I saw students who were Baptist, Evangelical ... all baptized after making an adult decision, all familiar with the baptisms of people who had wrestled personally with their faith decision. And then there were the students who were seekers ... curious about Christianity and never baptized.

What should I say to them? What would *you* say to them? Thank God my mouth was full! (To chew slowly and carefully before you open your mouth is a good thing.)

- Everyone is a child before God.
- Baptism is a decision – a choice to follow the way of Jesus.
- The decision needs to be *personal*, but it is also a *community* decision.
- Baptism is always a covenant between God, one person, and the community

In the spiritual life, we never learn anything on our own – the Spirit of God works in our hearts, and guides us through the Christian community.

Now the girl who needed to sit in *her* chair left Oberlin for her junior year abroad.... When she came back to school, she came back to Monday lunch and went straight to ‘her’ chair ... and there was a freshman sitting in it.

‘That’s *my* chair!’ she said to the unsuspecting freshman, expecting him to move immediately.... The whole group fell silent, and then some began murmuring gently, “Let him sit there...” The – poor The poor freshman didn’t know what to do, and simply froze in the chair –and the girl who wanted her chair actually left in a huff, slamming the door behind her.

She returned a few Mondays later, still pouting a little, but finally willing to sit in a new place.... But she let the group know that she wasn’t very happy about it.

That would be the end of the story – except years later, Rob and I met her at St. Andrew’s, Saratoga – now in her early thirties, eager to learn, willing to share, and a full member of the community. She had grown up, and the church had helped her grow.

The Spirit in the community teaches us the Way of Jesus. And that’s why we, the Baptizing Community, will be asked to respond today

At the baptism of babies and children: *Will you by your prayers and witness help this child to grow into the full stature of Christ? (BCP p. 302)*

At the baptism of young people and adults: *Will you do all in your power to support these persons in their life in Christ? (BCP p. 303)*

And we will answer, *We will, with God’s help.*