

The child in and among us

A sermon by the Reverend Robert Bruce Edson in Saint John's Episcopal Church, Franklin, Massachusetts, on September 20, 2009, the Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost.

And he took a little child and he set it among them, and taking it into 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." Mark 9:37

The scene in today's gospel takes place in the town of Capernaum in northern Galilee. This is where Jesus spent most of his ministry of preaching, teaching and healing. The disciples James and John are seeking a place of honor and prominence with him and argue about which of them is the greatest. It is time for a lesson in humility. When Jesus confronts them, they are silent and don't admit their claims. He gathers them together and explains to them that personal recognition is given only to those who don't seek it. He tells them that those who want to be first are last and servant of all. It is only in sincere humility that God sees any merit. Jesus then brings a child among them and makes the point that whoever welcomes such a child in his name welcomes God who sent him.

Welcoming children into our midst is essential to our mission. How we include them in our life together says a great deal about how we value everyone in the church, regardless of age. In Jesus' time it was thought that children should not be present during worship until they were "old enough," though no one was very clear about when that was. Not much changed in the centuries that followed. I clearly recall as a child that we always belonged somewhere else other than in the worship place. The church has come along way in including children in the liturgy and I am glad for it.

It was a radical idea for Jesus to teach that we must enter his realm as a trusting child. In first century Palestine, children were among the least of people and were marginalized with no status at all. The point is that their very vulnerability and spontaneity and innocence serve as examples for us. It is their very dependent nature that reminds us of how dependent we are on God. Yet, we don't like to be obliged to anyone or dependent on them. Children are more open and receptive to while adults can be skeptical and cynical.

It is apparent when you come here that this is a child friendly parish. It is good that children and young people are part of the liturgy. If we believe that all baptized people are full members of the church, then children need to be fully incorporated in our worship life together. To be sure, there are clearly occasions when it is not appropriate to expect infants and smaller children to be in church and are more comfortable in the nursery. But there are other times when it is inappropriate for them to be kept away, particularly at the Eucharist. You may notice the atmosphere changes when children are brought in at the offertory to join their families at the Eucharist. Participation in the Eucharist and receiving the sacrament is not a matter of the intellect, but one of inclusion and participation. Children understand as much as we do about the nature and meaning of the Eucharist and they also know when they are being excluded.

Let's review a few important points regarding children in church. First and foremost, they are with us because they are an essential part of the family of God. They will grow in faith if we give them the opportunity and environment in which to grow. It is condescending to think of them only as the future of the church; they are part our present life together. They need to be trained not just to sit and be quiet and draw but to take part in the liturgy as a shared experience.

Greet them when you see them in church. Help them find their place in the Prayer Book and hymnal. Encourage their participation. Answering their questions during church is less disruptive than shushing them up. Children learn by example and the best example is our own.

It is my sense that we tend to underestimate a child's ability to comprehend things of a spiritual nature. We all have our humorous stories of children who didn't quite get something right and we smile at their innocence. But there are also times when we are humbled when they are right on the mark in their observations. Our tendency may be to keep things from children that we think will upset them is out of our natural inclination to protect them, but my feeling is that it is better that they are kept informed. Children want short but honest answers to their questions even if you have to say that you don't know. Attempts at bluffing are transparent. When they ask religious questions regarding the nature of God and heaven, it is simply the finite human mind inquiring about the infinite. Children can accept things better than we think. They live in the here and now. They don't have preconceived ideas of how things ought to be. It is essential that we teach them to aspire to what is right and true and just.

We are all equal in the sight of God as we kneel together here at the altar. It is a very human thing to want to be regarded with respect and honor and be recognized for who we are, no matter what age. It is when we are more concerned about our own status and privilege and place of honor that we learn that all our assumptions are turned around. Whoever thinks he is first will be last and whoever is last will be first. Jesus identifies with the lowly and the outcast. In God's realm we do not seek high honor or privilege, only to serve others, especially those who can't do anything for us.

Wouldn't it be wonderful if scholarships were awarded, jobs offered and people elected to public office because they really want to serve others? The reward system of our culture more often goes to those who serve themselves and to those who are looking to get ahead. Instead of out performing, out scoring and outdoing others, the noblest calling is to serve others and not ourselves. I admire those who are willing to give up years of service working with service organizations such as City Year, Americorps and the Peace Corps. They work under difficult conditions for low pay with a primary purpose of making a difference in lives of others. God looks for the marks of selflessness and humility in all of us.