

## **Whoever Welcomes** **Rev. Bobbi Wells Hargleroad**

### **Mark 9:30-37**

It seems appropriate that this service began with Ron Gray's pitch of Visitors' Sunday, for the theme of our gospel reading is welcoming. "Whoever welcomes a child," says Jesus, "welcomes me. Whoever welcomes me, welcomes the one who sent me." So I would invite you to listen for the Word of God in this reading from the Gospel of Mark.

A few years ago, this congregation made a startling decision. Our Children's Ministry Committee recommended to us that our children should be welcomed into worship. For a church like this one ... with a sanctuary like this one, with a history and worship style like the ones that we have ... that was a pretty radical decision. Because for years we, and hundreds of churches like us, had been ushering our children out of our sanctuaries and into church school or program during this hour.

But then came this new decision, this new affirmation: children belong in worship; children should be welcomed into worship. In that simple act we affirmed two basic promises: First, that children are a vital part of this community life. As, I said, however, it was a pretty radical decision ... when we made it and is still today.

And although we have gotten used to the idea of spending this hour together, we are only now beginning to fathom some of the implications of worshipping together as a community made up of many ages ... and many different stories. As with many decisions made in communities, this one was extraordinary — and it had extraordinary implications, many of which we are only now beginning to explore ...

Our action was almost as extraordinary as Jesus' taking a child into his arms and turning to his disagreeable disciples and saying, "This is what my ministry is about ... If you welcome a child, you welcome me."

For in Jesus' day, children were not the center of attention and adoration that we like to think they are today. Rather, ancients regarded children as terrible nuisances who were to be disciplined and "tolerated" until they became "reasonable" and "useful" adults. In Greco-Roman culture, children were without status, and they possessed no power or position in society. Infants, particularly infant girls, were often abandoned, cast aside, by families and left to die ... a scenario, which unfortunately is still with us in many cultures, including, far too often, our own.

And so, to the disciples, for Jesus to take a child and put it in their midst, was perhaps not unlike the images we have had in the news so often in recent weeks, of Princess Diana taking the hand of a leper or embracing a person with AIDS. Jesus took a person from the lowest rung of society and embraced and welcomed her ...

In the painting by Emil Nolde, which Ed shared with the children earlier, we can see the consternation on the faces of the disciples. They are still wrapped up in their argument over

status and privilege. They don't want to be reminded that Jesus' ministry is about welcoming the very least, the very lowest, into the community of Jesus' kingdom. They are absorbed by their fight over rank and order, over who will win and thus who will lose, over who can be "first" and thus who will be relegated to lower status.

Jesus' definition of greatness stands the world's way of ordering its priorities on its head. It radically challenges fundamental human assumptions about achievement.

In Jesus' day, children are held in low esteem, yet he takes a child in his arms. The word used here is the same one used by the prophet Isaiah in speaking about the suffering servant (53:2). Thus, for Jesus to embrace the child is to enact a parable of his kingdom, to demonstrate for all to see his self-identification with the lowliest and the least ...

There is a wonderful story that comes to us from the Hopi Nation of the southwestern United States. When a decision needs to be made, the whole community sits around in a circle called the Medicine Wheel. Around that circle are representatives of all the different aspects of the community. And in the center is the children's fire. Next to the fire sit the grandfather and grandmother. If you want to propose a project to the community, you have to enter the Medicine Wheel and let each person around the circle respond to you according to their role or position in the community. The last persons to respond are the grandmother and grandfather who guard the children's fire. If these two decide that the request is not good for the children's fire, then the answer is "no." They are the only ones in the circle who have the power of veto. The ultimate question is always the same. Does this proposal hurt or help the children's fire? If it can pass the test of the children's fire, it can be done. If not, no action will be taken ...

I serve on the Congregational Mission Planning and Strategy Council of Chicago Presbytery. There are so many congregations in the presbytery, and I assume the same is true in the Chicago Metropolitan Association of the United Church of Christ, where there are literally no children, no youth, no young adults, no couples anticipating the arrival of children ... literally, in many cases, no households with members under 60 years of age!

We, on the other hand, have children! We have teenagers! We are running out of classroom space on Sunday morning, and we are crowded on Sunday evenings when the youth groups come and take over the ground floor level of the building. What a delightful difference this congregation is! And what a delightful problem to be running out of space ...

As a congregation, we are going through our annual budgeting ritual. Council has looked at a preliminary budget with increased funding for education and programs for children and youth. We are trying this year to develop a budget, which reflects more adequately our valuing of children and youth, and programs which serve them, and our delight that children and youth are indeed a part of our community. Will our budget, we might ask, pass the test of the children's fire?

But, I would submit that in asking that question, we need not be reminded that for Jesus to embrace of a child is not simply the embrace of a person young in years, but the embrace of persons who are vulnerable in other ways as well.

Perhaps the “child” we need to be reminded of is the middle aged adult, suddenly unemployed ... the single parent, striving to make ends meet ... the teenager struggling with questions of sexual identity ... the newly widowed partner ... a person who is hearing impaired or in a wheelchair ... the young, minority male ... an endangered species on the streets of our city ... or even the new member of this large, and sometimes quite impersonal, congregation who comes to the door of the church midweek and isn’t recognized ...

Perhaps the “child” we need to be reminded of comes for tutoring on Tuesday evenings at Pine Avenue Church in Austin ... or is fed at the Austin Community Table.

Perhaps the “child” lines up outside our building on Monday nights and sleeps on the floor in Centennial Hall ... or is a victim of war ... in Bosnia, Northern Ireland, the Sudan, the Middle East ...

What would it be like if we were to make our decisions as a community ... with children, with vulnerable ones ... as our test? What changes would this mean for our programs? For the way we organize the building? For staffing, for our relationship with the Nursery School? And with other groups, such as AA and the shelter, which use our building? Would it perhaps change the way we think about our denominations? For it is through them that we are in mission to many vulnerable ones whom we can never meet and serve directly ...

We take the children in our midst, very, very seriously. We covenant with them in baptism. We welcome them into worship, and we are continuing to learn and explore what that might mean. Earlier this month, we reaffirmed our baptism and our calling to be nurturers and teachers in the midst of this community. Today, on the insert, is “A Vision for Children and the Church,” a statement adopted by the 205th Presbyterian General Assembly in 1993 ...

"What do our denominations do?" is a question often heard around here ... One new thing they do is remind us of who we are and call us to a new vision of our ministry, here as a single congregation or in connection with other congregations through denominations or through ecumenical and interfaith linkages. This statement from the General Assembly is just such a reminder ...

And ... one last question, a troubling question implied by Jesus’ conversation with these disciples. How are we at welcoming? Visitors Sunday is in four weeks. I would like to challenge us to get better at welcoming between now and October 19th. For some of those who seek us out may not fit the “profile” of the “ideal” member. They may have a few needs as well as gifts to share with this community. They may have some vulnerabilities. They may be new to the United Church of Christ or to the Presbyterian way of doing things ... or they may be new to the Christian faith altogether. They may, in other words, be just like you and me, the people who are already here ...

And how easy it is to forget what it is like to be new ... and unknown ... unrecognized ... to be unfamiliar with this building and its many levels and numerous doors

To be unfamiliar with our intricate ways of doing what we do, ways, which have evolved over time, ways that make perfect sense to us, but may be totally strange to someone who is here for the first time.

We are all Children of God. There is no age limit on God's love. Whoever welcomes ... whoever practices hospitality in the name of Jesus Christ ... welcomes him, indeed welcomes the very spirit of God, into this community. May we be such a welcoming community to all of God's children.

Amen.

*The Rev. Bobbi Wells Hargleroad, former editor of Church & Society Magazine preached this sermon when she was the pastor of First United Church of Oak Park (Illinois), a congregation affiliated with both the PC(USA) and the United Church of Christ.*