

The Smallest Among Us | Mark 9:30-37

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It was one of those messages that stopped my breath.

Back in the spring,

We heard the wonderful news that our good friends

Were expecting their first child.

This is a couple I've known for ten years,

Who saw us go through the process

Of expecting our first child and then, our second.

Now, we could watch and wait and celebrate with them:

In empathy,

visceral joy,

And a handing down of wisdom

When the struggle and the success is still fresh!

She and I made time for a long phone call in August.

She shared all about what her pregnancy had been like so far-

The first twenty or so weeks of it.

She asked lots of questions about newborns and family and community and of course, all of the stuff.

We spent a lot of time talking about newborns

And the emotional and physical realities of being a first-time mother.

A few days after our phone call,

I realized that we didn't even get to the topic of labor and delivery!

But she was only 24 weeks,

So I thought there would be time for that

Closer to the baby's due date.

A month later, I got the text.

I opened it and immediately saw an image

Of an impossibly small baby,

Wrapped in tubes and gauze in a hospital bassinet.

"Katherine arrived this morning at 28 weeks, We have a long road to go,"

My friend had written.

The baby had arrived almost 3 months early,

Completely unexpectedly.

Thankfully, she's receiving excellent care,

and getting stronger as the days go by.

But that intensely vulnerable image

is staying in my mind

as I hold this little family as I go about my days.

Often, when a baby is born,

I get stuck in a romanticized reaction.
I moon about how fresh and new and cuddly,
How beautiful and innocent
And full of pure love! New babies are.
This image, though,
Gently moved all of those to the side.
Instead, front and center,
Was *powerlessness*.
The absolute powerlessness of this brand new baby.
All newborns are powerless, to be sure,
But how much more is this true for little Katherine's life:
Not only is she dependent on her parents,
She is dependent on a whole team of medical professionals,
And advanced technology to continue growing and developing.
She needs a stable hospital in a safe, stable community.
Before any of our ideas or projections
about innocence or perfection in children even begin,
She is intensely vulnerable, utterly dependent

*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."*

We often hear this passage and combine it in our memories
with other places in the gospels
Where Jesus praises childishness *itself*.
Like in Matthew 18:
*"Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children,
you will never enter the kingdom of heaven."*
There, being "innocent" to the ways of the world
Or having the qualities of a child
is itself what is commended.
But that isn't at the center this morning,
In this particular passage.
Here, it is the embrace of the powerless,
the intensely vulnerable themselves.

On the journey, the disciples are trying to determine
Their places within their social group.
Theirs was a hierarchical society
Where one's status and the honor connected to that status
Was significant...
Just like in our society,
though our markers of status and influence might be very different.

Scholars believe that the close association of servanthood and childhood
Might be because the same word could be used
to refer to servants and children in Aramaic and Greek.
In this culture,
Children occupied a secondary status.
Not considered to be fully human,
Lacking social status and legal rights.
Children were absolutely dependent on others
For their growth, protection, and survival.

And yet,
As Jesus tries to show the disciples
How the kingdom of God operates,
It is *just* one of these little ones,
A not-quite-person,
a totally vulnerable being
That Jesus takes into his arms.
His emphasis is on those without power,
not necessarily those who are innocent.
Jesus' command is to RECEIVE the powerless.
Here, the humble
are being placed at the center of God's kingdom.
The way that one embraces or rejects
the powerless and the humble
Speaks directly to our discipleship.

Many of us hear the words "non-person"
Or "secondary status"
And picture the beloved children in our lives
And shudder.
This language almost seems barbaric,
To think about children in such terms.
And in some ways, we have evolved our understanding.
But I want to resist the temptation
To disregard the power of Jesus' gesture
As merely a symbol
And a symbol relevant for another time.
Because it is still true that children are often the first to suffer
When war or famine arrive.
We need only think about the stories we've heard
and the images we've seen from Gaza,, Sudan, and Ukraine.
We need only think about all the ways our government
And our leaders
Decline to direct resources, power, and protection
To children,

or laws and programs that would protect children and their future.
In our community,
Especially at the beginning of a new program year,
I am asking myself
How can we center the experience of the most vulnerable and powerless among us?
Certainly the beloved children in our community,
But also those made vulnerable
Through advanced age, medical conditions, or social position.
When we zoom out,
It seems that we can still learn a lot from Jesus' bold embrace.

When we welcome the child -
the powerless and the humble in our world -
We are welcoming Christ.
Because they, especially, belong to him.
In embracing the child as we would embrace Jesus -
He seems to be saying -
We move closer to embracing the God
Who willingly took on powerlessness and humility
In humanity.
What is the good news here?
The good news is the rules and limitations and cruelties of the wider world
constructed by human beings is just that -
human construction.
It is not what God has planned.
It is not what God desires.
It is not the way that God sees God's creation.
In Jesus, we hear the startling insistence
That God upends all...
By embracing the powerless, the humble, and the last
And taking on powerlessness, humility, and the last place
To become the servant of all.

In this passage,
We hear the phrase
"On the way"
Several times.
This puts Jesus' teaching in the context of the journey of discipleship.
This story is very much about being on the way:
The way of Jesus,
Or the way of love,
As our presiding Bishop Michael Curry calls it.
The way is a *mode* of being,
A process,
A journey,

Movement.

A position of welcoming those without power or influence in our midst,

And in doing so,

Welcoming God who also made himself subject

To human powerlessness

In human life and human death.

May we be blessed

by this embrace

Of the smallest among us.